Chapter 1

In Their Own Voices

Women Writers Of Africa
A. Unravelling Skeins - Women and the Oral Tradition

The existence in Africa, of an ancient oral tradition, extending to vast and complex genealogies and historical narratives, drama, poetry and songs, storytelling, proverbs and jokes and the legacy of the griots - raconteurs who could, through amazingly strong memories, delve into the past, not just a few decades but even centuries, and bring forth authentic re-creations of past occurrences, is probably the most significant cultural difference between Africa and the Western/European world. But, despite Western education and the spread of literacy, it would be misleading to present this tradition as something archival, of mainly anthropological interest. Not only are the oral traditions alive, current, creative and contemporary; they are also still a primary means of culture projection, information transmission, and a tool of imparting education for the majority of rural dwellers of Africa, especially in Western and Southern Africa.

Thus, to fully appreciate African literature, it is essential to understand that ‘orature’ (oral literature) is its bedrock, providing a metaphysical philosophy to the African literary tradition and infusing it with aesthetics. In the oral tradition, as in writing, social norms and values as well as symbols and conventions are handed down from the past to the present. The present in turn uses and adapts its cultural inheritance
in order to transmit the values of the past to the present as a part of the process of cultural representation and socialization.

African women have played a central part in the oral tradition by their intelligent use of language and infusion of an element of realism. Oral narrative builds on the nucleus of a well-known, oft-told story, passed down through tradition, along with various culture symbols, images and character types. Since the audience was often familiar with the story-line, the specific artistry lay in the performance and in the dynamics built up between the performer and the audience.

In the oral tradition of the pre-colonial African world, the oral tale was performed at the homestead, mostly by women, who, as bearers of culture, reproduce and creatively adapt stories handed down by their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations. The storytellers were usually older women, entrusted with the education of young boys and girls. Most stories were conservative and, as far as the representation of women was concerned, it was usually portrayal of feminine destiny bound up with motherhood, and parables of how traditionally arranged marriages and not choices of personal desire worked towards the good of the community.
B. The White Imprint - Impact of colonialism on early 20th Century writing by Africans.

Despite the vibrancy and cultural importance of the female-associated oral tradition, the missionaries who arrived in the 18th and 19th centuries encouraged African men to translate the parables and write the didactic biblical tales needed to help spread the Christian message. African women’s literary voices were thus to a large extent displaced by print. In addition, the European incursion into Africa was characterised by a misapprehension, which still endures, that because nothing was written down, Africa had no history and no literature. ‘White Settler’ writings contributed powerfully to the mythologizing of Africa by the white imagination; in many colonies, a way of coming to terms with the ‘new’ country was the manufacture of myths and the invention of false lore as a “coping mechanism”. This process was indeed an integral part of the psychology of colonialism as also seen in India and the West Indies. Settler myths were adapted to replace history, which contained ‘inconvenient’ facts such as the great Zimbabwe ruins of a civilization, which the whites were reluctant to accept. Such myths were therefore cultivated in order to justify the white takeover of Africa, and to maintain the whites’ assumption of their superiority to the black populations.

Thus the most common myths floated by the colonial powers were those which emphasised the white ‘rescue’ of a continent from savagery and the ‘civilising’ influence of a superior European culture. Cecil Rhodes was therefore seen as a great pioneer taking over an "empty
land". Yet, fortunately this is a product of a relatively brief set of historical circumstances.

If this white settler writing is discounted as belonging to the European tradition, the first woman novelist in East Africa is Grace Ogot, whose novel The Promised Land (1996) was one of the first pieces of imaginative writing in English by a member of the Luo tribe. The novel, typical of its period, reveals Ogot’s interest in collecting traditional folktales and recreating the African past, which is achieved by a use of subtle blending of ‘gothic/romantic’ situations with contemporary settings.

Reclaiming the African past was a predictable theme for African writers in the 1960s. Destroying the colonial myth and recording African traditions at a time when they seemed to be rapidly disappearing was an urgent task for writers like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe and the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong'o.

Family Spear (1973), a play by the Uganda poet and dramatist Elvania Namukwaya Zirimu looks at the conflict between old and new from the woman’s point of view. It describes the slow erosion of family ties, and conflict between the generations, in a society in which traditionally the father has the right of the first night with his son’s new bride. As Family Spear indicates, celebrating the African past as part of the process of liberation is by no means simple for the African women writer when it is precisely such aspects of traditional life, which are the source of the problem. As the Nigerian critic Omalara Ogundipe-Leslie
has lucidly remarked, "... it is easier to eliminate the colonial influences that were imposed from outside than to eliminate generations of tradition from within African society," a viewpoint very valid in, and reflected by the works of the many contemporary Indian women whose works form the research substance of a later chapter in this thesis.

C. A Strange Forked Tongue - Contemporary African Literature in European languages.

The existence of contemporary African literature in European languages is a direct result of Western education, introduced to Africa by missionaries and later promoted by the colonial authorities as a way of producing an elite for the government and administrative echelons, albeit the lower rungs. One effect of colonialism has been to impose a false homogeneity on a region which is, in fact, extraordinarily diverse in its ethnic groupings, tribes, nationalities, languages, relations, beliefs and practices. To understand the cultural production of Africa, it is essential to appreciate that it is far older than colonialism, and that both francophone and anglophone writers write from within a dual tradition. Whether or not they speak an African language, they are informed by an awareness of the technique of orature overlaid by Western education and a European language.
Orature has traditionally been overlooked by Western commentators or relegated to the category of folklore. The same is seen as true also of African history. Because it was not written down, (with a few exceptions such as the Hausa Chronicle of Northern Nigeria), people from literate cultures tend to assume that Africa has no tangible history.

The displacement of African languages was an intrinsic part of the colonial incursion, with its aim of bringing the colonized people under both the moral and legal sway of the 'mother country'. Thus the literature of Africa is marked by a contradiction, since it is written mainly in European languages and is therefore inaccessible to a large percentage of the population. The language debate is thus the most vexed. Critics and writers alike are split. Some hold that writing in indigenous languages is the only way to truly express one’s culture and identity as an African. Others, although agreeing in principle take a more pragmatic view: that the colonial intervention in their history is an irrefutable fact which has inscribed itself, above all, in a language which many Africans are more fluent in and comfortable with.

Here, one agrees with Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah who says: “The medium is a matter of inner compulsion and it will be rejected if it inhibits response, distorts truth, does not create what it pretends to convey”. He further goes on to elucidate: “... success is proportionate to the thoroughness with which a writer masters his medium... For what we are looking for in a work of art is not merely the language, but the way
language shapes a shared tradition, a community of interests and a set of values people live by.”

A century or more of use of the adopted language naturally results in it taking on a local flavour which also makes it essentially an African language. But the local inflection may not conform to a critic’s notion of ‘literary’ language. Many writers like the Nigerian Flora Nwapa were criticised for their stilted use of English, or a pidgin or creolised form.

Similarly, in the context of Indian writing in English, dealt with in detail in a later chapter, there has been, in the post-colonial era, a lot of criticism aimed at the so called neglect of Indian languages. This in essence is not valid and the vast outputs in various Indian languages have gone to prove the detractors wrong.

African literature, as Lauretta Ngcobo remarked, is “…a fledgling literature, fighting for its survival at all levels. Not only do we have to contend with the problems of writing, but we have problems communicating with publishers, with critics, and even with the institutions of learning… Yet, women have views, vital points of view, which differ markedly in certain respects from those of our male writers - perspectives that reveal how women perceive their societies and their roles in those societies.”
D. The Personal Voice - Autobiographical elements in Black women writers.

African culture is multilingual, multi-cultural and patriarchal. Male domination has existed, and still exists, in different ways, across different groups, complicated, of course, by race and class oppression. However women have played a key role in cultural life, although one not necessarily antagonistic to hierarchies of gender, race and class.

For the most part, the world of African fiction has been a masculine domain, in which women are conspicuous mainly by their absence. A glance through Heinemann’s African Writers Series yield only five women writers, two of them white South Africans. Also standard critical works as Gerald Moore’s, Charles Larson’s and Eustace Palmer’s studies of the African novel also focus on its dominant male tradition. But despite this tradition and its basis in the fact that until recently, the overwhelming majority of African literary works in all genres have been produced by men, there is a growing body of African literature written by women- an alternate female tradition with its own peculiar vision of contemporary African experience. Buchi Emecheta in Nigeria and Ama Ata Aidoo in Ghana have shown that the past looks different from a women’s perspective, by having demystified traditional life as well as by celebrating its diversity and richness. Similarly writers such as Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Mariama Ba, Rebeka Njau and Grace Ogot are no longer solo voices crying in the wilderness. In an interview in the 80s in fact, Ogot explained that the dearth of women writers in
Africa is quickly disappearing and went on to predict that in another five years the market will be flooded by women writers, writing serious literature on all aspects of life.

The first novel by a West African Woman published in 1966 was Nwapa’s *Efuru*, a story of a woman in a traditional village in eastern Nigeria. The novel is remarkable in two ways. First, despite the obligatory nature of motherhood, Efuru is childless. The author presents her heroine as a strong, respectable, independent woman, who is chosen by the town’s goddess, the woman of the lake, who is herself childless, to be her acolyte. Second, the novel is remarkable in its narrative technique. Nwapa says that *Efuru* is the story of many women whom she heard talking in her mother’s sewing shop. It is told in a form of English as close as possible to Igbo, with a liberal sprinkling of Igbo sayings and expressions like ‘Let the day break’ and ‘It is only hunger’, and Igbo proverbs, which are an intrinsic part of oral culture, and the repository of traditional wisdom. In other words, the writer gives us, not an individual heroine, but a collective consciousness, which is refracted through the oral storytelling elements of her prose.

It is interesting to compare *Efuru* with the work that has been called the archetypal African novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, published in 1958. Achebe is also Igbo, and his novel also has a traditional village setting, and uses oral elements. However, where Achebe shows the conflict between the old world tradition and the new values brought by colonialism, Nwapa focuses exclusively on the village,
with barely a reference to the white man. Achebe creates in Okonkwo, a tragic hero who is destroyed by his inability to change, but Nwapa suggests that for her heroine, the conflicts are already present in her own community.

Nwapa’s emphasis on community and the collective voice brings to mind the emphasis of African-American and Caribbean women writers on ‘foremothers’ as a source of inspiration. By this they mean the older women whose stories they heard as children, the women talking in the kitchen as also described by Paule Marshall, the Black American writer in her books such as Brown Girl, Brownstones and Daughters. If there is one factor binding African women’s writing in all its diversity, it is very likely this sense of kinship with the oral tradition, and of a collective experience.

The world of the woman writer in Africa is largely defined by gender for various reasons, a historical one being very relevant. It is indeed a matter of debate whether patriarchal culture was innate in African society or was a legacy of the white colonialists, but it is evident that, in addition to the female roles prescribed within traditional culture, contacts with Islam and the West brought new sets of relationships that affected the condition of women. European colonisation and traditional African attitudes combined to exclude women from education and was thus successful in impending literary creativity. The routine of African women’s lives as child-bearers and wage earners left them no time to dabble in the craft of writing. The requirements described by Virginia
Woolf\textsuperscript{9} for the women writer, of leisure and solitude, have no place in the lives of the majority of African Women.

Whether trying to liberate herself from negative aspects of traditional culture or caught between the conflicting worlds of Africa and the West, as in Achebe’s protagonist Okonkwo, the African woman often meets conditions which inhibit and are repressive.

Since literature more often than not reflects realities rather than transmute and search for new identities, what is striking about writing by African women is a strong undercurrent of resilience, in spite of a feeling of déjá vu, a capacity to mould their own identities either in their own country or in case of translocation, in the country of their adoption, and in a broader spectrum, forge an entirely new ‘feminist utopia’ as seen from a woman’s perspective: a creation not necessarily of an unique space - a dystopia\textsuperscript{10} distanced from men, but a genesis of a mental though tangible idea which metamorphoses into a space where women can safely grow, both intellectually and emotionally, surrounded as it were by the very instruments of their oppression - be it fathers, husbands or sons.

In an interview, the Kenyan novelist and playwright Asenath Odaga observed that “the male has always been dominant in Africa; this is their world, the society is theirs.”\textsuperscript{11} That this remark was apparently made without rancour, simply in pragmatic recognition of the status quo, reinforces this sense of polarization.
Primary in the aid to their growth is understandably education, education meant power, a tool to help them to mutate from servile to independent, rational, self-willed human beings on par with their male counterparts. From this gender polarization much else follows. Like their 19th century counterparts in Europe, African women in the 20th century have had slower access to education than men. Pamela Kola says of the Kenyan situation, "Education was given to men first. If you don't have the basic education you are not exposed to other people in different spheres of life, how can you write?" Similarly, the Tanzanian Penina Muhando makes the same point that "women have suffered historically, being left behind even when they are very capable, because of the structure of society."

Thus as is evident from the above remarks by various African women writers and sociologists, the tool to empower women was not willingly handed over, but rather grudgingly conceded after much debate, and even then not to all sections of the African society.

E. We Too Have Hands\textsuperscript{14} - Feminism/Womanism/Pragmatism

Beyond social realism, African women's writing has a definable aesthetics which distinguishes it both from Western feminists writing and from writing by male counterparts. It is an aesthetics which privileges communication, setting up a dialogue into which the reader is invited to enter, rather than alienating the readers by the use of mystifying literary techniques or imagery. Statements like these illustrate the different
priorities of Western and African feminism. Feminism itself is, by
definition, a very individualistic ideology, in contrast to the communal
nature of African society.

In general the feminism of East African women writers is a
pragmatic one, one which argues that the woman issue cannot be
separated from the overall problems, since woman naturally cannot be
separated from the rest of society, and the liberation of woman has to be
part of the liberation of the society itself. As a Western discourse,
feminism continues to be debated and qualified by African and Afro-
American women writers like Alice Walker, Buchi Emecheta and Ama
Ata Aidoo. The use of concepts from Western critical theories as an
aspect of cultural appropriation is central to recognition of this debate and
the problems of cultural production faced by African women writers.

Though separate women's organizations have existed in Africa,
very few women would define themselves as 'feminist' in the Western
sense. Feminism is indeed a vexed issue, being by and large identified
with the more extreme aspects of 'women's lib' and perceived as
inappropriate in an African cultural milieu. As with African-American
"womanism", a term associated with black feminism and defined by
feminist critic Alice Walker as the handing down of womanish attributes
from mother to daughter, the key difference between black and white
feminist ideologies is the refusal of the former to repudiate men and the
family. It is very common to read highly placed women being
interviewed in the press who preface their remarks with 'I am not a
women's libber'. Many of the writers share this antipathy for the 'feminist' label, even those who, like Buchi Emecheta or Ama Ata Aidoo, are most readily identifiable as feminists.

The traditional separation of spheres, by which men and women had their own organisations and took separate decisions, meant that women had a voice and were listened to. This recognised space for women and the status it afforded them were undermined by colonial assumptions about the place of women.

One of the reasons why African women have often felt alienated from the demands of the Western Women's movement - the right to work for example - is because, in Africa, women have always worked. Under a polygamous system as portrayed in Emecheta's and Nwapa's novels, each woman is responsible for her own children, and gains status from her success in trade or business. Economic independence is not as much an aspiration as a necessity. Thus, whereas Western feminists discuss the relative important of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural aspect.

Here it is relevant to understand that an important impetus behind the wave of African writing by men which was started in the 60s was the desire to show both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified, complex and altogether a worthy heritage. This was obviously opting for fighting cultural imperialism, and
in the course of that, the women’s issue was either ignored or relegated to a secondary position. The Malawian poet Felix Mnthali in fact states this one view very clearly in a poem called ‘Letter to a Feminist Friend’:

I will not pretend
to see the light
in the rhythm of your paragraphs;
illuminated pages
need not contain
any copy - right
on history
My world has been raped
looted
and squeezed
by Europe and America
and I have been scattered
over three continents
to please Europe and America
AND NOW
the women of Europe and America
after drinking and carousing
on my sweat
rise up to castigate
and castrate
their menfolk

from the cushions of a world

I have built!

Why should they be allowed
to come between us?

You and I were slaves together
uprooted and humiliated together
Rapes and lynchings --
the lash of the overseer
and the lust of the slave-owner
do you friends 'in the movement'
understand these things?

No, no my sister,
first things first!

Too many gangsters
still stalk this continent
too many pirates
too many looters
far too many
still stalk this land --

When Africa
at home and across the seas
is truly free
there will be time for me
and time for you
to share the cooking
and change the nappies-
till then,
first things first!

To this the Nigerian lecturer at Ibadan, Leslie Molara Ogundipe answers in a paper called 'Women in Nigeria'. It is interesting, she says, to notice that it is his world that has been raped and looted, and she points out that cultural liberation cannot be separated from women’s liberation and that the problems of polygamy, women’s role in the economy, their legal status and education have to be considered as aspects of the national struggle. Thus one sees that the choice of subject of the first generation of modern African writers has had a profound influence on the attitudes to women and the possibility of a feminist school of writing. Thus the women’s issue was not only ignored- a fate which would have allowed it to surface when the time was right - it was conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence.

"The African past was not made the object of a critical scrutiny the way the past tends to be in societies with a more harmonious development, it was made the object
of a quest, and the picture of women’s place and role in these societies had to support this quest and was consequently lent more dignity and described in more positive terms that reality warranted. Achebe’s much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Igbo society becomes less than praiseworthy seen in this light: his traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in traditional wisdom, behaving like a woman is to behave like an inferior being.”

Yet, as their educational opportunities have improved over the past several decades and as they have begun to penetrate the social and political spheres that constitute the main arena of African fiction, women writers have begun to record and interpret the cataclysmic changes they and their world are undergoing in contemporary Africa.

F. A Double Yoke19 -African Womanhood in the novels of Buchi Emecheta

The profound upheaval effected in women’s lives by these changes is the particular territory of one of the most gifted and prolific of the African women novelists, the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta. In less

The first two autobiographical books, recount the near heroism of Emecheta's performance. Through the struggles of their central character, Adah Obi, we learn how Emecheta began writing in a tiny council flat in North London, somehow carving out enough time to write from her hectic life as a university student, British Museum librarian, and single parent of five small children. An awareness of the hardships surrounding their genesis, however, is not necessary for an appreciation of Emecheta's novels and the totality of their achievement. For though they are not inter-related installments of one encompassing work, it is revealing to look at the novels as a part of a larger whole - a single, continuous narrative which amounts to a kind of epic of female experience in twentieth-century Africa. In addition, her autobiography *Head Above Water* (1986), *Double Yoke* (1983) which come out of her experiences as a writer and concerns the double standards women have to deal with in their pursuit of education and *Gwendolen* (1989) her latest novel dealing with a young girl's transition from the Caribbean to England - makes her the most talented and multifaceted woman writer of Africa today.

Taken together, in fact, Emecheta's novels compose the most exhaustive and moving portrayal of the African woman, an unparalleled portrayal in African fiction and with few equals in other literatures as
well. The entire realm of African female experience can be found in these books, from birth to death, with all the intermediate steps of childhood, adolescence, marriage and motherhood.

Emecheta’s historical and social breadth in the novels is equally impressive: covering a period from the early 1900s to the present, and moving from the small Nigerian village of Ibuza to urban Lagos and finally to London.

In the African communities depicted in these books, families exert a great deal of pressure upon young people in order to uphold traditional taboos, customs and privileges in relation to marriage. Apart from the largeness in scope, Emecheta’s account of African womanhood is an unapologetically feminist one. She gallantly exposes and repudiates the feminine stereotypes of male writers and reveals the dark underside of their fictional celebrations of the African woman.

She explores lucidly and yet at the same time matter-of-factly, the psychological and physical toll arranged marriages, polygamy, perpetual pregnancy and childbirth, and widowhood have on women. Thus we see that the female figures hovering uncertainly in the background, burdened with traditional and symbolic cargo, in male-authored African fiction are brought to the centre, as it were, by Emecheta, and an entirely new drama emerges as a result of this radical change in sexual perspective.
The best place to approach Emecheta’s fiction is with neither her first nor her last book, but instead with one of the middle novels, *The Slave Girl*. For, as its title discloses, 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.

The novel is about the story of a young girl Ogbanje Ojebeta born to her parents after they had lost many girl babies. Her father Okwuekwu and her mother Umeadi adored this child naming her Ogbanje - a visitor.

“... as it became apparent that the child might indeed live, her (Umeadi’s) mind went to all the sacrifices she had made to her chi, the personal god to whom every Ibuza individual appealed in time of trouble. Her loss of daughters had continued for so many years, however, that Umeadi had reconciled herself to the fact that maybe that was her lot. Now the new baby suckled with so much force, she was convinced there was some life in this one.

... she sent a male runner to go to inform her husband of the good news.... Girl children were not normally particularly prized creatures, but Okwuekwu had lost so many that they now assumed a quality of preciousness.”(SG, pp10,11)
Both parents dote on the little visitor as they call her, pandering to her every desire, even the dangerous journey to bring the charms as advised by the dibia is undertaken with pleasure. Okwuekwu had to go far to the kingdom of Idu to purchase charms to protect Ojebeta from the spirits who want to lure her away to the next world, little knowing that these would be the very instruments to give his daughter courage and a sense of identity later on in her life when her parents were no more. “Thus Ojebeta remained in the land of the living ... She was cherished and marked with special tattoos and she thrived and grew, and had to make annual visits to the dibia who adjusted her charms as she grew from babyhood to girlhood.”(SG. p.14)

At the outset, Ojebeta’s life seems to be highly atypical because she is eagerly anticipated and cherished as the only female child of her mother to survive infancy. As Emeheta remarks, such joy in a daughter’s birth is extremely rare. Both Ojebeta’s parents, in fact, lavish love and attention on their precious daughter. Her mother has elaborate, beautiful tattoos stencilled on her daughter’s face. But such indulgences abruptly end when Ojebeta is orphaned at the age of seven.

“One morning, misty and damp, a fine rain was being blown from among the giant iroko trees .... The wind was strong enough to toss all the bits of dried leaves about and shake Umeadi’s makeshift mourning hut.... Ojebeta crawled near her mother for warmth, reassurance and protection.... Where her mother lay,
there was security, and Ojebeta called out to her in the gentle tone she found herself using recently, since her father's death.... She called gently again and when there was no response, guessed that her mother was still asleep.... She was startled by a voice wailing and shouting as if hell had been let loose. Then a strong pair of hands was lifting her from the mud floor on which she was lying beside her mother. By now Ojebeta understood. Her mother Umeadi had gone too.... 'Why did she leave me behind with no one to look after me?' ”(SG pp22,23)

Just at the age when she is passing from dependent infancy (her mother had allowed her to nurse until she was six) to young girlhood - the age when the young child begins to grope towards autonomy and the creation of a distinct identity - Ojebeta is sold off by her brother Okolie to a distant relative, a wealthy trader named Ma Palagada who lives far away from Ibuza in Onitsha, for eight pounds, so that he can selfishly purchase scarves, anklets and beads for his coming-of-age dance costume.

The young Ojebeta in many ways seems the prototypical Emecheta heroine. She is beautiful, intelligent and headstrong restively unhappy and yearning in her constrained existence.
“Ojebeta could cry no more. She saw the charms which had been tied on her by her loving parents, to guard her from the bad spirits of the other world, filed painfully away.... She now cried in her heart which was throbbing up and down as though it would burst, as the hard lesson made itself clear to her that from this moment on she was alone. (italics mine) Her survival depended on herself.... 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: what ever 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.

‘Have them, but you must hide them in your npe....’

The ghost of a smile crossed Ojebeta’s tear-stained face and for a moment illuminated her swollen eyes. She might have lost her identity, but at least she could still hold on to the dream of it.... It was going to take her a long time to learn to be somebody else.” (SG pp 68,69)

Ojebeta’s brother Okolie is also filled with remorse at what he had done, and although his conscience chides him, his mercenary spirit overrules all such guilt. Yet his thoughts race:
“‘Look, it took my mother over fifteen years to placate the gods, before she had the little girl that she wanted so much to be her companion, her daughter, her friend and her very own. And do you know what I have done? I have sold her to a rich woman who is distantly related to us, for eight pounds - and, see, I have the money here with me. Do you think I have done wrong?’... Okolie shed a silent tear of remorse, grateful that the darkness would hide it. But he soon felt comforted when his hands involuntarily touched the rustling English notes... He told himself that Ojebeta would be well looked after.”(SG p23)

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of Ojebeta’s servitude at the Palagadas is that it is not an entirely abhorrent life. She forms close bonds with a number of other slave girls, although in the beginning such existence seemed strange to her.

“Time is always said to be a great healer of wounds, however deep they may be when fresh, and Ojebeta’s case was no exception. She had one great advantage over many other who suffer loss: she had youth. For days she cried silently, since the joy of letting other know your sorrows was denied to slaves like her. Nobody actually told her she must not talk about her
past; circumstances simply made it impossible to do so or even think about it.

All Ojebeta saw was a group of girls who behaved so quietly, as if frightened for their lives. 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 to the wooden dolls in front of her chi shrine at home in Ibuza.”(SG pp 84,85)

Thinking again of her dead parents Ojbeta almost cried again. As for her brother Okolie, she tried to forget him. “That he could leave her among these people, he her only brother, whom she had trusted so completely- if he could do that and not so much as tell her what it was all about, it was better that she forgot him.”(SG p 86)

As she resigns herself to her fate, she realises that Ma Palagada seems a kind of foster mother to her at times. Indeed, there is much to lull Ojebeta into acceptance of her slavery: she lives in a palatial house, has plenty to eat, nice clothes since Ma Palagada is a cloth trader and dressmaker and above all, she receives the rudiments of education.
Education, as Wilhelmina Lamb\textsuperscript{21} 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. Emecheta has no faith in social changes 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 it is education. Hence Emecheta's most autonomous and fulfilled heroine is the university-educated Adah in \textit{In The Ditch} and \textit{Second Class Citizen}, while her most powerless and oppressed is the illiterate Nnu Ego in \textit{Joys of Motherhood}.

\textit{In The Slave Girl} one sees 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 a Sunday school run by an Englishwoman and here she learns to read Ibo, an accomplishment which not only gives her and the other slave girls a modicum of power and prestige as "elite slaves", but also "endless amusement; they read and re-read the stories [from an Ibo story book]... until they knew most of the little book by heart."(SG p 105)

The power of education for women is a double power: it is the first step towards social and sexual freedom, but less pragmatically, it also frees their hearts and minds. Books can transport Emecheta's heroines from their own cramped, miserable worlds to far-off places and exciting experiences they could never know in their real lives. Hence Objebega's absorption in the Ibo story book. And, in \textit{Second Class Citizen} education
becomes the route to self-knowledge, as we can see in Adah’s eager reading of Flora Nwapa and James Baldwin.

Objebeta’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 an Englishwoman, where she learns such domestic skills as how to bake cakes, crochet and embroider and this training of course, has the opposite effect of her earlier education. It serves to confine her to the appointed feminine sphere of domestic labour.

For, Emecheta makes it abundantly clear that for Ojebeta, coming of age in the twenties and thirties, there is no possible escape from this sphere. About a third of the way through The Slave Girl, Emecheta presents an appalling dramatic episode that she repeats almost verbatim in her later novel, The Joys of Motherhood. The scene provides a kind of objective correlative of her vision of African womanhood, a haunting incident that reverberates backwards and forwards in the novels, which precede and come after The Slave Girl. One of the secondary characters, a young girl named Chiago, who had befriended Ojebeta tells her how she witnessed the live burial of a slave girl not unlike themselves:

“The chief wife of the master of the house had died, and it was necessary for her husband to send her to the land of the dead accompanied by a female slave. The one chosen was a particularly beautiful slave, with smooth skin and black closely cropped hair.... On the
eve of the burial she was brought and ordered to lie down in the shallow grave. As might be expected, she resisted but there was no pity on the faces of the men who stood by watching amused by her cries. She made appeals to the gods of her people to save her, she begged some of the mourners to spare her life ... but to no avail. One of the sons of the dead woman lost his patience and ... took a club and struck the defenceless woman hard at the back of her shaved head.... She did not drop into the grave.... Instead, she turned to look at the chief, who was calling on his son to cease his brutality, and she said to him, ‘For showing me this little mercy, chief, I shall come again, I shall come again....’ She was not allowed to finish her valedictory statement, for the stubborn young man, disregarding his father’s appeal, gave the woman a final blow so that she fell by the side of the grave. But she was still struggling even when the body of her dead mistress was placed on her. She still fought and cried out, so alive. Soon her voice was completely silenced by the damp earth that was piled on both her and the dead woman.”(SG p 62)

The live burial of the beautiful and futilely defiant slave girl symbolically expresses the plight of all Emecheta’s heroines. During her early days at the Palagadas’, Ojebeta reflects:
"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." (SG p 113)

Even when she is released from her servitude and returns to Ibuza after Ma Palagada’s death, Ojebeta is still not free.

"... she was in no doubt of the fact that she would rather stay in Ibuza where she was wanted by her people and where she was regarded as the daughter of an illustrious man. 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 someone in place of her father or her older brother, and then, in general, by her group or homestead. But at least she belonged to these people by right of birth and nobody would dare to call her slave because she was not." (SG p 160)
The slave masters, the tyrannical oppressors, in *The Slave Girl* are all men. Very early in her servitude Ojebeta learns this. “What time was there to think about yourself when as soon as the first cock crowed, around five in the morning, a loud bell was sounded by the big male slave called Jienuaka. If by this time you were still asleep, a biting whip slashed round your body, and you jumped up, and ran like a wild animal let out of a cage, wriggling with pain. You could be the early age of four or a mature slave of thirty, the same treatment applied. At the time Ojebeta went there she was seven.” (SG p 84)

In addition, Ojebeta becomes aware of Pa Palagada’s insatiable lust when she overhears two older girls Chiago and Nwayinuzo whisper to each other at night, thinking that the other girls were asleep. Snatches of conversation nevertheless gives young Ojebeta an inkling of what Chiago had to undergo.

“... the fact that Pa Palagada had insisted on her (Chiago) helping him to bed did not make things easier for her. Pa Palagada likes her, that much she knew. By contrast, it would never have occurred to him that she might hate the very sight of him. She had learnt to stop protesting, to accept his attentions and be quiet about it all. But now they said this equally horrible son was coming from wherever they had dumped him for the past four years - was she to be used as a plaything for him too? ...What she could not bring herself to tell her
friend was that she had had to give in completely to the man’s gross appetite. That each time their mistress had gone to another village to sell her abada cloth, Pa Palagada would call her to his room on any pretext. Many a time she had come out feeling physically ill and sick at heart; but at least he had promised her her freedom....”(SG p 92)

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 books and the best one with which to approach her other writing. With Ogbanje Ojebeta, the heroine of The Slave Girl, one goes back in time - all the way back to 1910, the year of Ojebeta’s birth - and back to the beginning of woman’s life cycle in order to understand the origin of woman’s slavery. In fact, Emecheta is casting an entire generation behind her own birth. While In The Ditch and Second Class Citizen are thinly disguised autobiographies, The Slave Girl seems to be a fictionalized biography of Emecheta’s mother. Towards the end of the novel Ogbanje Ojebeta acquires the English name of Alice; The Bride Price, the novel that directly precedes The Slave Girl, is dedicated to Emecheta’s mother, Alice Ogbanje Emecheta!

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 seem to say that it is pointless to speculate whether they loved and cared for each other forever after:
"Those words make no sense in a situation like this. There was certainly a kind of eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced maybe by centuries of traditions, taboos and, latterly, Christian dogma. Slave, obey your master. Wife, honours your husband, who is your father, your head, your heart, your soul. So there was little room for Ojebeta to exercise her own individuality, her own feelings, for these were entwined in Jacob’s. She was lucky, however, that although Jacob proved to be quite a jealous man he was above all a Christian. 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.” (SG p 178)

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. Ma Palagada’s son Clifford turns up some years after Ojebeta’s marriage to collect the eight pounds which Jacob owes him for Ojebeta, and Clifford is astonished at the drastic change in her:
“Ojebeta had changed, she was thinner, much older than his imagination would have allowed. She was also very nervous and rather unsure of herself and her unbecoming outfit. He could still glimpse the ghost of the girl he had known so many years ago, in the carriage of the neck and in the jet black skin that still shone in places. But the old Ojebeta - the energetic, laughing one - was gone for ever.... Momentarily her wondered what had happened to change her so much?”(SG p 181)

With her paltry education, not even the defiant and clever Ojebeta can hope to escape her fate of slavery. The most she can do, as she realises, is to select her own master. Hence the novel concludes with Jacob’s formal purchase of his wife from Clifford, the son of her previous owner. Ojebeta herself is too defeated, too cowed to be fully aware of, much less rail against, her abasement. She kneels before Jacob and confesses, “Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master.”(SG p 184)

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 the bitterly ironic statement that “…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." (SG p 184)

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 (brothers, masters, husbands) in The Slave Girl, and finally to children in Joys of Motherhood. But whoever or whatever the enslaving power may be, Emecheta shows that the oppression of women is an invariable constant. The most a woman can hope for is to be able to choose the least cruel available master.

If The Slave Girl is a study of the oppression of women by men, The Bride Price explores the enslavement of women by traditional society and its rules and taboos. As such, the novel provides a striking contrast to the celebration of traditional life among male African writers. While Emecheta’s portrayal of traditional society is not entirely untinged by nostalgia for a simpler and in some ways purer rural existence, she is not blind to the injustices and suffering inflicted upon women by traditional customs and mores. Such customs, in fact, are actually institutionalized forms of male oppression. The inheritance of widows by their brothers-in-law, the custom that a man may make an unwilling woman his wife by kidnapping her and cutting off a lock of her hair, the prohibition against women marrying descendents of slaves, and numerous other inhibiting manifestations of traditional culture in The Bride Price are all determined and enforced by men. Thus the major difference between The Bride Price
and *The Slave Girl* is not seen in the oppressive power so much as in women’s response to it. In time Ojebeta is crushed by her environment and in the end she willingly submits to it. Aku-nna, the heroine of *The Bride Price*, in contrast bravely flouts tradition, though in return she too is crushed, even more completely than Ojebeta. For Aku-nna dies at the end of the novel, giving birth to a daughter who seems to represent the new, free female self that Aku-nna has aspired to be.

Traditionally, families have considerable say about whom their young people may marry. Adults recite proverbs and stories to the young that warn them of the disasters that will ensue if they disobey the long-established procedures that are designed to govern behaviour. *The Bride Price* could itself be used as a story that warns young people of what happens to disobedient girls. It is the story of a young woman, Aku-nna, who defies her family by running away to marry the man she loves. Aku-nna has fallen in love with Chike, her schoolteacher; who, because he is educated, seems to be an excellent choice for a husband. However, she is forbidden to marry him because he comes from a family of ex-slaves. When Chike tries to pay the required bride price for her, the bride price is refused. Traditional belief says a woman whose bride price has not been paid will die in childbirth. Aku-nna does indeed die in childbirth, unable to survive the pregnancy after years of malnutrition, but her people believe she died because her bride price was never paid due to her disobedience. No one criticizes her stepfather, neither for his stubborn refusal to accept the bride price, nor for his rituals to invoke her death as
punishment for her rebellion. People in the community condemn her, not him, because he is conforming to custom and she is not.

The novel opens in *medias res*, on the fateful afternoon of her father’s death. Aku-nna is a schoolgirl of thirteen, guilty for being a girl, and intends to live up to her name ‘father’s - wealth’, by bringing him a good bride price. Her father had hoped that the education she is receiving would offset her physical vulnerability of being too thin, too brown, two delicate and sickly. Now her father’s death, in practical terms, means that the children and their mother must return to Izuma - their shared security and firm identity are shattered by Nna’s death - to the polygamous household of Nna’s brother Okonkwo. He is by tradition obligated to receive them and they have no choice. Their prospects brighten when Ma Blackie is accepted as wife by Okonkwo and proves her value by becoming pregnant. The children’s schooling continues, but Aku-nna feels cut off: “It came to her now that she was completely alone”(BP p89) She knows that with sexual maturity will come an arranged marriage, with her bride price bringing her step-father/uncle Okonkwo higher status.

*The Bride Price* is singular among Emecheta’s novels for several reasons. Most noticeably, after the opening chapters set in Lagos, it takes place entirely within traditional society, so the book lacks the urban-rural tension of *The Slave Girl* and *Joys of Motherhood*. Though Aku-nna and her husband move from Ibuza to a larger town where they acquire such appurtenances of western culture such as a real bed and a Volkswagen,
the destructive effects of western development are not an issue in the novel, since, above all, Emecheta is concerned with destructive effects of traditional society. It is significant, however, that she fails to proffer the urban environment of either Lagos or London as a refuge from traditional constraints. The point made here, seems to be that, there is no escape, no sheltering environment in which the union of Aku-nna and Chike can subsist.

Margaret Read Lauer, in a book review of The Bride Price elucidates that Ibo traditions are tenacious, and is evidently reassured that values will survive the falling apart of an ancient culture. But there is the other side of the coin of tradition, the less positive and beneficent face of this tenacity, which is the side Buchi Emecheta reveals in her second novel The Bride Price.

In this novel, Emecheta shows how numerous indigenous African customs and superstitions oppress and degrade the female. People adhere to the belief that a female is worthless to a family except for the bride price she will bring to it. Custom insists upon the dissolution of a family when a father dies, because a family is simply not a family without the male in it. This belief enhances male privilege, for, the widow is inherited by her husband's brother without any regard for what she or his wives may feel about it. Furthermore, the daughter may be dispensed with, by making her a servant in a relative's home. As Aku-nna's aunt tells her, the death of her father makes her an orphan. Obviously her mother does not count. Custom dictates that the uncle's family should
marry off Aku-nna quickly to get enough money to pay her brother Nna-
nndo's school fees. Custom tells Aku-nna she is 'unclean' when
menstruating; in that condition, she will pollute a stream, or, if she enters
certain households, she will cause the head of the family to die. Custom
allows boys to "play at squeezing a girl's breasts until they hurt ... so
long as it was done inside the hut where an adult was near".(BP p 97)
Custom lets an Ibuza boy make a girl his by sneaking up and cutting her
hair. Hence, many girls cropped their hair very close; those who wanted
long hair wore a head scarf most of the time.

When Aku-nna is kidnapped by Okoboshi to prevent her marriage
to Chike, she must give herself to him sexually; otherwise, he would call
and "all those drunken men would come in and help him hold her legs
apart so that he could enter her with no further trouble, the men would not
be blamed at all, because it was their custom". (BP p 135) When Aku-
nna succeeds in escaping from Okoboshi and running off with Chike, her
stepfather feels he has been degraded and therefore retaliates by
following another Ibuza custom: "In Ibuza, if a man divorced or no
longer wanted his wife, he would expose his backside to her in public".
(BP p 155) Thus is her mother punished, even though, because of her
powerlessness, she had made no move to help her daughter.

Another unique feature of The Bride Price is the fact that it is a
romantic love story in the Romeo and Juliet pattern of star-crossed lovers.
Romantic love is the most ubiquitous theme of the Western novel, but it is
a comparatively rare concern in African fiction. The African novel, for
various historical and aesthetic reasons, is a far more public, socially and politically oriented literary form than its European counterpart. Although men and women meet and marry and reproduce in African novels, usually such activities are secondary to some larger action. In *The Bride Price* Emecheta forsakes this larger context and reduces her fictional world to Aku-nna and Chike, their families and their village. Yet at the same time, Emecheta exposes the crushing force of a traditional society that extends far beyond the limits of Ibuza.

As stated earlier, at the beginning of the book, Aku-nna is on the brink of puberty, a skinny girl of thirteen, whose only worth seems to be the bride price she will fetch for her father. Indeed in this novel, women are portrayed solely as marketable commodities. When women are not inherited or sold, they may become stolen goods. It is against this background of the forcible possession and exploitation of women that the poignant but doomed love story of Aku-nna and Chike unfolds. Chike is the only really sympathetic and attractive male in Emecheta’s fiction, for it seems that her male characters tend to fall into one of the three classes, all of which wield power over women: authoritarian patriarchs, libertines, and sadistic villains. Chike is none of these, but instead belongs to the despised Oshu, the descendents of slaves. Chike, in fact, has a doubly significant status vis-à-vis Aku-nna: not only is he from a slave family, he is also her schoolteacher. He is intimately involved, then, in her education - always a liberating force in the lives of Emecheta’s heroines - and thus to some extent responsible for her growth as a student and her successful completion of her secondary school examinations, which in
turn enables her to become a teacher in her own right. Thus after they elope and move to Ughelli, they come close to establishing a true marriage of equality as both work outside their home and share domestic chores within it.

It is interesting and relevant at this juncture to go deeper into the ‘position of women’ in Africa, placing here some facts of academic social anthropology. Wendy James after in-depth analysis and first hand experience has this to say:

“...in Africa, South of Sahara, in both traditional and modern conditions and even in the Muslim areas, the ‘position of women’ has a good deal to be said in its favour by comparison with other major cultural regions such as the Mediterranean, the Arab Middle East, India or China. Of course there are contrasts between one part of Africa and another, even between closely neighbouring peoples. But a reading of the literature, together with personal experience gained from travel, leaves one with a striking series of impressions of relative economic, political and sexual freedom of most African women.... Nowhere in traditional Africa, south of the Sahara, were women veiled on wrapped up physically.... Nowhere were they secluded within the walls of the domestic household and cut off from public life as in some other regions. African forms of
architecture and settlement patterns themselves did not permit such seclusion nor such a separation of the domestic from the wider sphere of social life. They very openness of life in the villages makes visible the African woman’s daily tasks, whereas her Arab or Indian sister’s daily work is hidden where possible from passing strangers. It is true that there is an image of the African woman’s lot being one of hard labour and virtual serfdom to her lord and master, even of being ‘bought and sold’ in marriage, but the payment of bride-wealth is no more ‘buying a wife’ than European and Indian dowry was ‘buying a husband’.

Although valid, the argument presented above still does not justify the stifling of women’s rights on the ground of non-compliance with tradition. In The Bride Price, Aku-nna and Chike’s highly unusual marriage also owes its mutuality or equality to Chike’s reviled background. Slavery, as we have seen in The Slave Girl, is for Emecheta the inherent condition of African women. Chike’s status as a slave serves to ‘feminise’ him, not in the sense of emasculation, but by making him sensitive to the oppression and exploitation of women. He too is of an inferior class, and thus he is able to love and live with Aku-nna on a plane of equality and mutual respect. The great irony of their union is that Aku-nna and Chike have their traditional society to thank for its reciprocity; because it has oppressed them both, they are able to enjoy for a short time at least, a perfect oneness and happiness.

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But star-crossed lovers cannot live for long outside society. Their tragedy, with familiar classic features is inevitable, because there is no world for them, no place in which their love can survive, hence it is doomed to destruction. Despite her education and bravery in defying her family and village and despite the sustaining power of her love for Chike, Aku-nya is ultimately destroyed by traditional society. Her stepfather refusing the bride price offered by Chike’s father makes a voodoo doll in Aku-nya’s image and pierces it with a needle. Shortly afterwards, Aku-nya dies giving birth to a daughter. The young lovers, heartbreakingly steadfast, moral and courageous, are doomed by tradition’s dead weight, by opponents that tradition supports, and by nature’s irredeemable accidents. Then, they become legendary, their lives made an ironic exemplum used to perpetuate the very taboos they had refused to be ruled by. Emecheta closes the novel in her characteristically ironic fashion:

“So it was that Chike and Aku-nya substantiated the traditional superstition they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. Every girl born in Ibuza after Aku-nya’s death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished to live long and see her children’s children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold over every girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernization, until the present day.
Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody’s guess.
(BP p 168)

Thus Aku-nna’s tragic fate is appropriated by the very power she sought to overcome, and is perverted into a threatening exemplary tale to coerce and intimidate women into obedience to traditional society and the men who rule it. The atmosphere of inevitable doom in the book seems to be a deliberate mockery of the fate-ridden genre of the African novel, and as such it is a powerful tool in Buchi Emecheta’s clearly ironic, and at times sarcastic mode of writing. She solves the problem of betrayal, which she clearly has to face, partly through referring to autobiographical data, which establishes her as a clear sufferer at the hands of traditional forces, thus legitimising her criticism of them, and partly by simply reversing the hierarchy of importance of her subject matter. Women’s emancipation is to her ‘the first thing’. Despite living in London she is more honest when she claims to be writing for her countrymen than other writers. She addresses the perceived ills of her society and ignores the repercussions this approach might have in terms of creating an adverse image of Nigeria, be it traditional or modern. Nigerian women have finally been taken off the somewhat dubious pedestal of silent upholders of the wisdom of traditional ways.

Emecheta successfully maintains the equilibrium between the artist’s involvement and the sociologist’s judicious disinterest, that offers the reader a deeply moving, yet sufficiently detached experience. Being herself a woman living out of the tribal culture but still touched and
affected by her knowledge of it, she brings a special clarity to her
treatment of the all-important tradition of bride price. For the first time
perhaps, a writer examines this viewpoint of the person most directly
concerned but least considered - the woman.

The reader is subtly aware of a caveat, lest he/she leaves the book
in patronizing complacence, with the thought that certain things can
happen only in remote Nigeria. Bride price in Nigeria is merely the
particular instance of a more universal phenomenon, a reminder of the
resilience of similar taboos that have always existed and still exist for all
of us, insidiously ready to block the way to happiness of the individuals
who would ignore them.

"...In a global perspective, the African continent is
today by far the major home of matriliney, the
systematic tracing of descent through women:... There
are vast regions of the Congo basin, of East Central
Africa and of West Africa, where matriliney was
traditionally the dominant form of organisation. And in
contrast to other parts of the world, in these African
areas matriliney has not only persisted into the present
day, but in a few societies seems to have flourished....
Matriline still persists, even among some communities
which have a highly sophisticated political, economic
and military organisation. History may occasionally
show how even a latent principle of matrilineal linking
may become a dominant mode of reckoning for jural purpose. We must not forget that, beyond the question of jural purposes, 'matriliny' may be understood in terms alternative to those of the holding and transmission of rights and powers. As a principle of biological and moral connection between the generations it may exist in many societies without finding legal expression as a channel for the handing on of power and rights, and yet nevertheless be of profound consequence for the lives of the people.”

Mary Douglas has argued that matriliny has certain advantages in an expanding modern economy, as among some of the Ghanaian peoples. Those who first speculated on the early history of the family, and of marriage assumed that the tracing of descent through women was a primitive form of social organisation which preceded the development of property and private wealth in which paternity of children was therefore clearly of no consequence. The tracing of descent through women was then assumed without question to be connected with the exercise of power and influence by women, variously categorised as the institution of mother-right, or matriarchy, or rule by women. The existence of matriliny today would have been regarded as a survival from the early days of human history, and it would have been taken for granted that this mode of organisation implied a special status and position of authority for women. These assumptions often constituted mythical representation of the past, rather than history.
There are echoes of the Amazon myth of the ancient Greeks in more than a few of the early writings of the evolution of the family. The transition to patriliny and patriarchy meant a real overthrow of female dominance. Engels, for example, after discussing Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* writes forcefully in his *Origin of The Family, Private Property and the State*:

"In proportion as wealth increased, it made the man’s position in the family more important than the woman’s, and on the other hand created an impulse to exploit this strengthened position in order to overthrow in favour of his children the traditional order of inheritance. This, however, was impossible so long as descent was reckoned according to mother-right. Mother-right, therefore, had to be overthrown, and overthrown it was. This was by no means so difficult as it looks to us today.... The male line of descent and the paternal law of inheritance were substituted for them. As to how and when this revolution took place among civilized peoples, we have no knowledge. It falls entirely within prehistoric times.... The overthrow of mother-right was the world-historical defeat of the female sex. The man took command in the home also; the woman was degraded and reduced to servitude, she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the reproduction of children. This degraded position of
the woman... has gradually been palliated and glozed
over, and sometimes clothed in a milder form; in no
sense has it been abolished."

But, as Engels admits, we have no evidence of this early revolution
in our affairs. One must therefore agree that this passage may belong
more to the realm of myth than history. In the first place the association
between the existence of a line of descent and the relative authority or
power of the sexes is by no means a clear or simple one. In fact it would
not even be accepted by modern anthropologists that such a correlation
could be found.

Thus Engels' picture, which parallels the thought of many authors
of his time, is easily faulted for representing matriliney and female rule as
the same thing, for assuming that modes of lineal descent are mutually
exclusive, and for claiming that the history of all societies has shown a
one-way revolution from one mode of jural descent to the other. As
Wendy James observes:

"Some of the faults in early evolutionary anthropology
were corrected with the establishment of professional
field reporting in social anthropology, and the
systematic empirical search for comparative principles
of social organisation. Matriliny, for example quite
correctly detached from the crude idea of rule by
women, was unfortunately separated from any question
concerning its more subtle consequences for the character of women’s lives, or relations between the sexes and within the family. The idea of rule by women was happily relegated to the realm of myth, for the empirical evidence appeared to show that everywhere societies were ‘ruled’ by men. In matrilineal societies no less than elsewhere, women were seen to be ‘under the authority’ of their menfolk. The dominant model of society remained one of the systems of rule, of the arrangement and transmission of rights and duties and powers. In matrilineal systems, it seemed, these powers were transmitted from males to males as in patrilineal systems, the only difference being that an intermediate female link existed.... The idea of descent itself came to be equated with the transmission of power and authority....”

There is an alternative way of approaching the whole matter in the concluding paragraphs of Evans-Pritchard’s essay. He implies here that the position of women in relation to men cannot be stated solely in terms of higher or lower status, or of differential wealth or rights, for it is a moral question of much wider implication. “Ultimately the status of women, and particularly her status in the home, goes beyond the scope of sociological analysis. It is fundamentally a moral question and whilst it is true that the findings of sociological inquiry must be taken into full
consideration in making a judgement, the judgement itself must derive
from some code of ethics.  

This could be taken as a starting point for building a more
constructive approach to the question of women and matriliny. The
granting of a key position to women in the logical formal ordering of
wider relations invites to look, not necessarily for ‘female rule’ in a crude
power sense, but for equally strong affirmations of the central qualities,
even the primacy of women’s position. Thus, in the matrilineal societies
of Africa, we do find characteristically positive evaluation of the centrally
creative role of women in contributing to the founding of a family and
building of a household, through both their productive and reproductive
capacities. The role of motherhood in particular is typically respected
and honoured, and represented as a central social category, from which
relationships take their bearing - particularly connections with the next
generation.

The Akan peoples of Ghana, and particularly the Ashanti, are the
best known and are among the most flourishing of the matrilineal peoples
of modern Africa, as also the Uduk of the Sudan -Ethiopian border.
Among the Uduk, as among most of the Central African peoples, the
premise of matrifocality is just as crucial to an understanding of both the
‘position of women’ and the ‘social structure’, as it is among the Ashanti.
In personal and moral terms the mother is the key figure in the kinship
world of the Uduk. In biological thinking, her blood is the physical
source of children, and the father in collaboration with the power of arum,
spirit, plays the part of moulding, or creating the child from her
substance. In these terms the primary tie and working obligations of a
man to his mother’s people generally, and to her in particular, are
explained. From these assumptions about the central importance of
women, other matters are justified. Socio-economically, for example, the
freedom of action of Uduk women is notorious in the region, particularly
because of the ease with which they make and break their own marriages
and even defend their rights and ... honours through formal stick duelling
or jousting, with rivals.

“If you ask the Uduk why they live with their mother’s
people, rather than with those of their father, they will
answer that it is because they do not pay bride-wealth,
as most neighbouring peoples do; and because they do
not exchange sisters in marriage, as a few of their
neighbours do. The idea of the direct exchange of
sisters by two men in a double marriage is more or less
acceptable to them in theory, though they say they
would never actually practice it since it leads to too
much fighting. On the other hand, the idea of bride-
wealth marriage is abhorrent to the Uduk, who say that
they will not let their sister go for a few goats, as
through she were an animal herself. They regard the
payment of bride-wealth as akin to the buying and
selling of people in slavery, something of which they
have direct experience and understandably hate.”27
The matrifocal premise appears in many other areas of Uduk thought and reasoning, where it provides a theoretical account of matters. For example, when a double rainbow shines in the sky, the Uduk say that the stronger brighter bow is the female and the pale secondary reflection is the male.

The separate pieces of data collected by an anthropologist, such as kinship terminology, residence statistics, rules of inheritance and political loyalty, may present a haphazard picture, riddled with contradictions and a lack of fit between one piece of evidence and another. But matrifocal premises of thought, which one has to grasp as a matter of fundamental orientation and intuition rather than explicit instruction, help to make sense of the Uduk and Ashanti systems, and such premises may help to make sense perhaps, of other, and apparently very different societies in Africa. Thus, it may not be surprising to find clues to the presence of underlying matrifocal ideas even in strongly and notoriously patrilineal societies of Africa.

In a varied range of African societies therefore, both matrilineal and patrilineal, one can sometimes discern a common cluster of ideas about the wider important of women’s child-bearing capacity, their creative role in bringing up a new generation, and even a recurring notion about the natural line of birth being handed on through women. One finds at the same time that given a positive moral evaluation of the nodal place of women in the definition of the wider society, the ‘position of women’ in the sense of personal freedom and responsibility is not
necessarily very different in those societies which are dominantly matrilineal from those which may be dominantly patrilineal.

Finally, coming to *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta brings all the above-mentioned subjects together in what until now is her best and most forceful book. Set in Lagos in the period from before and till after World War I, it describes the arrival and subsequent fate of an Ibo village girl who is brought to Lagos as a bride to one of the men in the fast growing community of expatriate Ibo wage earners. *The Joys of Motherhood*, in some ways seems a prologue and in other ways a sequel to *The Slave Girl* and *The Bride Price*. Its illiterate heroine, Nnu Ego, is certainly the most oppressed and powerless of all Emecheta’s women characters, largely because she is denied the education Ojebeta and Akunna enjoy.

When one looks at Emecheta’s five novels as a continuous tale of the African women’s evolution from enslavement to qualified liberation, Nnu Ego’s life is the point at which one must begin. Yet, at the same time, though, her story seems a continuation of Ojebeta’s and Akunna’s because it focuses on a later period of a women’s life cycle - the years of relentless pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood that the other two novels stop short of. In addition, though Nnu Ego is the most traditional of Emecheta’s heroines, she lives in modern Lagos and much of the hardships she endures results from her attempt to live by values that her environment has outgrown. Thus the conflict between traditional and
Western ways of life that is peripheral to *The Slave Girl* and *The Bride Price* becomes a major concern in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Foremost among these traditional practices and values that govern Nnu-Ego’s life are polygamy and the stigma of barrenness. Both derive from the traditional vision of womanhood that perceives women only in relation to their husbands and children. The traditional woman’s primary function is to bear male children who will perpetuate her husband’s name. Nnu Ego is remarkable among Emecheta’s heroines for never questioning - much less defying - the injustice of this pre-determined female destiny. This is due in part to the fact that in this novel, Emecheta seems to have divided the traits that characterize her previous heroines among three important female figures. Nnu Ego herself is by far the least complex of them, though her stoical strength and fidelity to a way of life no longer relevant to her world make her a sympathetic, even compelling figure. She resembles the striking mother figures of the earlier books, Ma Blackie in *The Bride Price* and Ojebeta’s mother Umeadi in *The Slave Girl*. The pity of Nnu Ego’s story is that she has been taken from the traditional environment that bestows a kind of dignity, even grandeur, on these other women, and translocated in a place alien to her. She is caught in the middle, between two worlds, unable to go back to that of her mother, Ona, and yet unable to adapt to modern Lagos as does her husband’s self-sufficient second wife, Nnu Ego’s co-wife Adaku.

Both Ona and Adaku are clearly foils to Nnu Ego; they represent modes of female experience from which she is excluded, and they also
recall key traits in Emecheta’s other heroines. Ona, Nnu Ego’s mother possesses the intelligence and courage of Aku-nna as well as the rare and pampered beauty of Ojebeta. She is also stubborn and arrogant, so much so that she refuses to marry Nnu Ego’s father, Chief Agbadi, a refusal that merely fans his passion. In the second chapter of the novel titled ‘The Mother’s Mother’ a description of Agbadi, his life, his ways and his numerous mistresses and wives help us form a picture of what Nnu Ego childhood among them may have been.

“Nwokocha Agbadi was a very wealthy local chief. He was a great wrestler, and was glib and gifted in oratory. His speeches were highly spiced with sharp anecdotes and thoughtful proverbs. He was taller than most and, since he was born in an age when physical powers determined one’s role in life, people naturally accepted him as a leader. Like most handsome men who are aware of their charismatic image, he had many women in his time. Whenever they raided a neighboring village, Agbadi was sure to come back with the best-looking women. He had a soft spot for those from big houses, daughters of chief’s and rich men. He knew from experience that such women had an extra confidence and sauciness even in captivity. And that type of arrogance... seemed to excite some wicked trait in him.... To regard a woman who is quiet and timid as desirable was something that came after his time, with
Christianity and other changes. Most of the women Nwokocha Agbadi chose as his wives and even slaves were those who could match his arrogance, his biting sarcasm, his painful jokes, and also, when the mood called, his human tenderness.” (JM p 10)

It is only in her portrayal of the love affair between Nnu Ego’s parents that Emecheta evinces any nostalgia for traditional life, and her nostalgia is significantly of a definitely feminist hue. Explaining Agbadi’s love for Ona, Emecheta paints a picture of bygone sexual equality in traditional society:

“One of these mistresses was a very beautiful young woman who managed to combine stubbornness with arrogance. So stubborn was she that she refused to live with Agbadi. Men being what they are, he preferred spending his free time with her, with this woman who enjoyed humiliating him by refusing to be his wife.... She refused to be dazzled by his wealth, his name or his handsomeness. People said that Nwokocha Agbadi spent all his life on this earth courting his Ona.

Ona was Agbadi’s name for her, not the name originally given to her. Her father was a chief... and... had maintained that she must never marry; his daughter was never going to stoop to any man. She was free to
have men, however, and if she bore a son, he would take her father’s name, thereby rectifying the omission nature had made....

Nwokocha Agbadi would not have minded sending all his wives away just to live with this one woman. But that was not to be. People said she has had him bewitched, that she had a kind of power over him; what person in his right mind would leave his big spacious household and women who were willing to worship and serve him in all things to go after a rude, egocentric woman who had been spoilt by her father?” (JM pp 11,12)

It is to such strong-willed and self-confident parents that Nnu-Ego is born. She is treated like a princess and her every desire is catered to. “Agbadi came the very second day and was visibly overjoyed. ‘Well, you have done well, Ona. A daughter, eh?’ He bent down and peeped at the day-old child wrapped and kept warm by the fireside and remarked: ‘This child is priceless, more than twenty bags of cowries. I think that should really be her name, because she is a beauty ... Yes, Nnu Ego: twenty bags of cowries.’ Nnu Ego was the apple of her parents’ eyes. She was a beautiful child, fair-skinned like the women from the Aboh and Itsekeri areas....” (JM pp 25-27)
By the time Nnu Ego has reached maturity, however, the quite, timid and obedient traditional woman has supplanted her spirited forebears such as Ona. Her father decides to get her married. Nnu Ego and her new husband Amatokwu were very happy; yet Nnu Ego was surprised that, as months passed, she was failing everybody. There was no child.

“‘What am I going to do Amatokwu?’ she cried to her husband, after the disappointment of another month. ‘Just make sacrifices... and pay your father a visit. He may have a suggestion to make.... My father is beginning to look at me in a strange way, too.’

After a while Nnu Ego could not voice her doubts to her husband any more. It had become her problem and hers alone.... When at home, Nnu Ego would take an egg, symbol of fertility, and kneel and pray.... ‘Please pity me. I feel that my husband’s people are already looking for a new wife for him. They cannot wait for me forever. He is the first son of the family and his people want an heir from him as soon as possible....’

She was not surprised when Amatokwo told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a nearly hut kept for older wives, because his people had
found him a new wife.... Amatokwo’s new wife became pregnant the very first month.” (JM p 30-32)

Unable to bear the thought that she could not bear children, and hurt by the callous indifference of Amatokwu, Nnu Ego comes home to her father, where she is fondly received. In the interest of his daughter’s health and mental well being Agbadi decides to return the bride price to the Umu Iso and makes up his mind to get his daughter re-married elsewhere.

“This time he wanted a man who would be patient with her, who would value his daughter enough to understand her. A man who would take the trouble to make her happy. Feeling this way, he refused all very handsome-looking men, for he knew that though they might be able to make love well, handsome men often felt it unnecessary to be loving. The art of loving, he knew, required deeper men.... Men who could spare the time to think. This quality was becoming rarer and rarer.... Agbadi prayed that he might find the right man soon, for he was well aware of the restless ripeness in Nnu Ego. Nor had he forgotten the last promise he had made to Ona when she was dying and had said to him: ‘Our daughter must be provided with a man of her own, if she wants it so, a man to father her children.’ ”(JM p36)
So she is married off to another man she has never seen, who lives in Lagos. Her new husband Nnaife worked at the house of a white couple, attending to the washing of their clothes. At this point Emecheta makes an interesting observation about the relationship of Nnaife with his white employers, his cowering attitude which is in stark contrast to his belligerence when dealing with Nnu Ego his wife. “Men here are too busy being white men’s servants to be men.... Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they do not know it. All they see is the money, shining white man’s money.” (JM p 51) Nnaife’s own reaction to being insulted is presented in a pathetic light by Emecheta, who doesn’t spare the whites for their sense of superiority either: “...He (Nnaife) would simply shrug his shoulders and say, ‘we work for them and they pay us. His calling me a baboon does not make me one.’ Nnaife did not realise that Dr. Meers’s laughter was inspired by that type of wickedness that reduces any man, white or black, intelligent or not, to a new low; lower than the basest of animals, for animals at least respected each other’s feelings each other’s dignity.” (JM p 42)

At the same time, Nnaife could tell that his wife Nnu Ego did not approve of him, his job, his looks and his sloppy appearance. He didn't care, and thought to himself that she couldn't do anything about it. For Nnu Ego, the only thing that gives her solace is the though of becoming a mother and pleasing her family, tribe and her chi.
“He demanded his marital right as if determined not to give her a chance to change her mind. She had thought she would be allowed to rest... after her arrival before being pounced upon by this hungry man, her new husband. After such an experience, Nnu Ego knew why horrible -looking men raped women, because they are aware of their inadequacy. This one worked himself into an animal passion. She bore it, and relaxed.... Another though ran through her mind: Suppose this man made her pregnant, would that not be an untold joy to her people?

‘O my Chi,’ she prayed as she rolled painfully to her other side on the raffia bed, ‘O my dead mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance. Oh, please help me, all you my ancestors. If I should become pregnant......She smiled wistfully....’ ” (JM p 44,45)

This feat is Nnu Ego’s only accomplishment, a hard won and ultimately empty one, as even she comes to see by the end of the novel. Hard won because during her first marriage Nnu Ego herself is barren and this failure to conceive results in brutal treatment by her husband, her demotion beneath lesser wives, and finally her banishment and return to her father. With this new husband Nnaife, she is able in time to become
pregnant but when her first born, a son dies in infancy, the horror of her renewed childlessness overwhelms Nnu Ego and she attempts to kill herself. Rescued, however, she goes on to bear eight more children, seven of whom live. The African woman without children is clearly better off dead, for she has no intrinsic value of her own. The only power a woman possesses is her procreative power, and if she is unable to exercise it, she is deemed useless and expendable, both in her own eyes and those of her culture. Thus:

“It was then that the people understood the reason for her irrational behaviour. Even some of the men had tears of pity in their eyes. Pieces of advice and consolation poured from people she had never seen before and would never see again. Many took the time to tell her their own stories... reminded Nnu Ego that she was still very young, and said that once babies started coming, they came in great numbers.

’she is not mad after all ... she has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren.’ And they all agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman.” (JM p 62)

Later Nnu Ego delivers a healthy baby boy Oshia and:
“...she was more confident. The voices of all the people who knew them had said she deserved this child. The voices of the gods had said so too, as her father had confirmed to her in his messages. She might not have any money to supplement her husband’s income, but were they not in a white man’s world where it was the duty of the father to provide for his family? In Ibuza, women made a contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role.... It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her first child. This time she was going to play it according to the new rules....” (JM p 81)

After a few years, Nnu Ego has her second child, also son proudly named Adim, short for “...Adimabua meaning ‘now I am two’. Nnaife was telling the world that now he had two sons, so he was two persons in one, a very important man.” (JM p 112)

It is this vision of women as a purely utilitarian adjunct to male existence that also lies behind polygamy. An African man’s wealth and prestige is gauged by the number of wives he possesses, wives who live together in a definite pecking order of seniority that naturally encourages competition and envy. Emecheta is one of the few African writers to portray the polygamous family from a woman’s point of view, and her vision of this entrenched way of life is far from flattering. Women who
share a husband have two grounds for anxiety: the insecurity of their own position and also that of their children. Thus when Nnu Ego gets the news that Nnaife’s older brother had died, leaving his numerous wives and children to be inherited by Nnaife as was the custom, she is shocked.

“‘Oh, Nnaife, how are you going to cope? All those children, and all those wives.’ Here she stopped, as the truth hit her like a heavy flow. She almost staggered as it sank in. Nnaife’s brother, the very man who had negotiated for her had three wives even when she was still at home in Ibuza. Surely, people would not expect Nnaife to inherit them? She looked round her wildly, and was able to read from the masked faces of the men sitting around that they had thought of that and were here to help their friend and relative solve this knotty problem. For a time, Nnu Ego forgot the kind man who had just died; all she was able to think about was her son who had just started school. Where would Nnaife get the money from?” (JM p 115)

Thankfully only one wife of the dead man, Adaku comes to stay with them, and to supplement his meagre income Nnaife takes up a job as a grass cutter at the railway compound. “One thing was sure: he gained the respect and even fear of his wife Nnu Ego. He could now afford to beat her up, if she went beyond the limits he could stand. He gave her a
title housekeeping money... paid the school fees for 'Oshia, who was growing fast and was his mother's pride and joy.' (JM p 117)

Emecheta's protagonist, Nnu Ego, had long accepted the patriarchal attitude that sons are more valuable than daughters, and feels ashamed when she bears twin girls, especially when their father Nnaife looks at them and says "'Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better?' 'In twelve years time, when their bride prices started rolling in, you'll begin to sing another tune,' Adaku put in, smiling broadly as if she did not mean to hurt anyone. 'He did not even suggest their names', Nnu Ego moaned. 'Twins don't deserve special names.'" (JM p 127)

Nnu Ego's initial anger and frustration gives way to stoic resignation, an indication of the extent to which the voice of tradition has her cowed down and stifled. It is now that Nnu Ego finally realises that if she does not take care, she and Adaku would be fighting for Nnaife's favour. She is afraid that her hold on the household was slipping. She takes every opportunity to remind herself that she is the mother of the sons of the family whereas Adaku only has a daughter, Dumbi. She teaches Dumbi to respect Oshia, as he is the heir and future owner of the family. So highly placed were boys in the eyes of the traditional family that even Adaku the mother of Dumbi tells Oshia "'You are worth more than ten Dumbis.' " (JM p 128)
This makes Oshia realise that he and his younger brother Adim were rare commodities, and that being the oldest, gave him a special status. Hence, Adaku’s anguish when she cannot bear Naife a son who will survive infancy. Nnu Ego keenly envies Adaku’s success as a trader, while Adaku would willingly surrender all of her wealth for one of Nnu Ego’s sons. Nnu Ego had accepted, too, that boys should get more education than girls, telling her twin daughters Kehinde and Taiwo that they must work hard to raise money to educate their brothers and put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. She describes the reward for the daughters thus: “When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you.” (JM p 176)

As Nnu Ego participates in the patriarchal system, both as victim and as perpetrator, she is angry more and more frequently. Her identification is now totally with the traditional role as wife and mother of male children.

At all levels, both Nnu Ego and Adaku are miserable because, no less than Ojebeta and Aku-nna, both are victims of sexual slavery. Adaku subsequently has two daughters, a further reason for despair, but she is rebellious and finally leaves the extended family to become a prostitute so that she can afford to educate her daughters, a thought that would never have occurred to Nnu Ego. The showdown between the two solutions to the women’s problems is a lesson in what to do as well as a deliberate shattering of religious shibboleths:
“‘I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future.... Nnaife is not going to send them away to any husband before they are ready. I will see to that! I'm leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife.’

‘To go and worship your chi?’ ‘My Chi be damned! I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my Chi!’ she added again fiercely. Nnu Ego could not believe her ears. ‘Do you know what your are saying, Adaku? The chi, your personal god, that gave your life....’ ‘I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman just because I have no sons. The way they go on about it one would think I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband.’

Nnu Ego sighed sadly. ‘I think you are making a mistake Adaku. Besides you could have a son when our husband returns.’ ‘Maybe you're right ...yet the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. Then we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have set my own.’ ‘May you chi be your guide, Adaku,’ Nnu Ego whispered
almost inaudibly as she crawled further into the urinestained mats on her bug-ridden bed, enjoying the knowledge of her motherhood.” (JM pp 168,169)

There is a terrible irony here, of course, in that Adaku like Ngugi’s Wanja in *Petals of Blood*,28 is freed through remunerative sexual submission. If we can trust African literature to reflect the realities of women’s lives in present-day Africa, it would seem that one of the few ways a woman can live on her own and support herself is through prostitution. The message of this is obviously not ‘get ye to a brothel’, but rather ‘do something, whatever is within your reach, with your head held high,’ and the prostitute in transitional urban society has been vindicated on grounds of initiative and courage. Adaku, then, makes her slavery pay, and selects her oppressors, so she gains some measure of power and control over life.

That Nnu Ego has neither is clearly foreshadowed in the slave burial scene in the early pages of the novel. The scene is an almost exact repetition of the one in *The Slave Girl*. When the senior wife of Nnu Ego’s father dies, she is interred with one of her slaves:

“A good slave is supposed to jump into the grave willingly, happy to accompany her mistress: but this young and beautiful woman did not wish to die yet. She kept begging for her life, much to the annoyance of many of the men standing around. The women stood
far off for this was a custom they found revolting. The poor slave was pushed into the shallow grave, but she struggled out, fighting and pleading, appealing to her owner Agbadi. Then Agbadi’s eldest son cried in anger, ‘So my mother does not even deserve a decent burial?’ So saying, he gave the woman a sharp blow with the head of the cutlass he was carrying.... ‘Stop that at once!’ Agbadi roared. The slave woman turned her eyes, now glazed with approaching death, towards him. ‘Thank you for this kindness.... I shall come back....’ ” (JM p 23)

The spirit of the murdered slave girl becomes Nnu Ego’s chi, her personal god, and as Emecheta remarks, “the slave woman made sure that Nnu Ego’s life was nothing but a catalogue of disasters.” (JM p 9) From the death of her infant son with which the novel opens to Nnu Ego’s own death on the last page, most of these disasters revolve around her children. For it is her children more than her husband or culture that enslave Nnu Ego. Before she reaches forty she has endured nine pregnancies (including two sets of twins), and seven of her children - a high proportion by African standards - survive. The cost of this perpetual maternity and this sole female identity as a mother is clearly seen by Nnu Ego in the last chapter ironically entitled ‘The Canonised Mother’. “ ‘It was true what they said,’ Nnu Ego realises, ‘that if you don’t have children the longing for them will kill you, and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you.’ ” (JM p 212)
Finally through her experience with her father, husbands and sons she comes to understand the patriarchal nature of her culture and her own role in perpetuating it. Instead of the traditional vision of children as a source of joy and wealth who more than amply repay the trouble of their upbringing, in *Joys of Motherhood* children and the man who fathers them are portrayed as milestones around the mother’s neck. Her love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery, or as greedy insects who suck out and drain her life’s blood:

“It was all so hopeless that Nnu Ego simply broke down and gave in to self-pity. Oshia, her son, blaming her as well. Of course to him his father was a hero. He was a soldier. He brought money into the family. All the poor boy had ever seen of her was a nagging and worrying woman.... Still, she reasoned, children became people. They would one day grow and maybe help their mother....” (JM pp 185,186)

By the time her second set of twins is born Nnu Ego has been bled dry by her long years of childbearing and motherhood:

“Before morning Nnu Ego had her second set of twins, which Nnaife delivered.... Nnaife was not very pleased with the outcome: all this ballyhoo for two more girls! If one had to have twins, why girls.... The arrival of her new twin daughters had a subduing effect on Nnu Ego. She felt more inadequate than ever. Men - all they were interested in were male babies to keep their names

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But did not a woman have to bear the woman-child who would later bear sons? ‘God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?’ She prayed desperately. ‘After all, I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them, I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them: it will be hailed as a good spirit so long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, my dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free?’ ” (JM pp 186,187)

But even in her confusion she knew the answer:

“‘Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That’s why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband; and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters?
We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build.’ ” (JM pp 186,187)

After this depressing tirade against no one in particular, Nnu Ego finally realises that women must work together to ‘change all this.’ Freedom for them must begin with rejecting the patriarchal glorification of motherhood. Although Nnu Ego’s anger and her feminist consciousness come too late in life to do much for her, the impulse towards freedom from indigenous patriarchal customs is reassuring.

Nnu Ego never is free, and she has very little to show for her protracted years of maternal servitude. She is particularly disappointed by her male children. After receiving good education in Lagos, the two older boys go abroad to study and never bother to write to their mother. It is only by word of mouth, in fact, that Nnu Ego learns that Oshia, her eldest son has married a white woman in America. Her daughters, in contrast give her a small measure of comfort, though it is the elopement of one of them with a Yoruba boy that brings about the disintegration of Nnu Ego’s marriage to Nnaife.

The pathos of Nnu Ego’s plight, which lends a kind of tragic dignity to her story, is that she is faithful to principles and ideals that have no currency in the urban world of modern Lagos. In westernized Lagos, traditional values, roles and relationships seem to be invalidated. Men like Nnaife are emasculated by their jobs doing white women’s laundry
or white men's cooking. Wives are denied the support of the village extended family so that all the child-rearing chores devolve upon them as they are cooped up in one-room flats with their babies and young children. Polygamy becomes unfeasible in such cramped quarters and the resulting additions to the family are a staggering economic burden. Born and bred in the village, Nnu Ego is unable to adapt to the new social realities of Lagos, but she is 'advanced' enough to understand the conflict between the two worlds that makes her life so miserable because she reaps only the bad points of each:

"It occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her. They knew that a traditional wife like herself would never dream of leaving her children.... At home in Ibuza she would have had her own hut and would at least have been treated as befitting her position, but here in Lagos, where she was faced with the harsh reality of making ends met on a pittance, was it right for her husband to refer to her responsibility? It seemed that all she had inherited from
her agrarian background was the responsibility and none of the booty.” (JM p 137)

Nnu Ego’s children, at least her sons, first exploit and then betray her, finally denying her the most basic of African children’s responsibilities, the care of their parents in old age. At the very end of the novel, Nnu Ego is able to connect her position of being torn between two ways of life, with her recognition that her devotion to her children the martyrdom of her life to theirs has all been for nothing: “‘She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman.... Still, how was she to know that by the time her children grew up the values of her country, her people and her tribe would have changed so drastically, to the extent where a woman with many children would face a lonely old age, and maybe miserable death all alone, just like a barren woman?’” (JM p 219)

This, of course is precisely Nnu Ego’s fate. Like so many other women, she has lived for and through others, as she has been taught traditional women must do. Nnu Ego dies one night, alone on the roadside, “with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother.” (JM p 224) Not surprisingly, when the people of her natal village build a shrine to Nnu Ego’s memory, she fails to answer their prayers for children.

“When her children heard of her sudden death, they all, even Oshia came home. They were all sorry she had
died before they were in a position to give their mother a good life. She had the noisiest and most costly burial Ibuza had even seen, and a shrine was made in her name.... Stories afterwards, however, said that Nnu Ego was a wicked woman even in death because, however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did. Still, many agreed that she had given all to her children. The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children, they said. Nnu Ego had it all, yet still did not answer prayers for children.” (JM p 224)

The complete futility of motherhood that one finds in Joys of Motherhood is the most heretical and radical aspect of Emecheta’s vision of the African woman. The backbreaking grind of childbearing and child rearing is a common theme among contemporary western women writers, but it is unusual among their African counterparts because of the sanctity of the mother-child relationship in Africa society. The primary commitment or bond in Western women’s lives is to their lovers or husbands: a man rather than children confers status on a woman. Among educated women at least, children are clearly of secondary importance, so that raising a family is often deferred for years or rejected altogether, because children are seen as interfering with women’s autonomy and also with their primary love relationship with a man. Such is rarely the case with African women, and hence Emecheta’s daring to portray motherhood as harsh and embittered, is astounding.
Because of her loyalty to her traditional role and identity, Nnu Ego's fate is inevitable. But though Lagos crushes anachronisms like Nnu Ego, it is certainly not ready for liberated women such as Adaku, portrayed by Emecheta as a foil to Nnu Ego. And herein lies the crisis that Emecheta shows faces the African woman. Adaku's fate demonstrates that the very notion of a liberated African woman is a contradiction in terms. There is an irremediable antagonism between the African woman's identity as an African and, as a woman. She must choose one over the other, and if she decides on female independence and self-sufficiency, she will almost certainly have to turn her back on her homeland, and go, as the heroine of Emecheta's first two novels does, to England or some other Western country. Like Adah Obi, she will have to sacrifice her African consciousness to her feminist aspiration. Buchi Emecheta has herself made the move into the westernized world, in which achievement and through it, a sense of personal satisfaction, is a road open to all women; and she is stating her strong preference for it. She has a firm belief in the power of individual effort, and she advocates rebellion and flouting of traditional values as possible, and at times commendable avenues of action.

As Lauretta Ngcobo, chairperson, succinctly remarked at the African Writers' Conference in London in 1984,

“Our women are caught up in a hybrid world of the old and the new; the African and the alien locked in the struggle to integrate contradictions into a meaningful
new whole. Women whose concern has always had to do with customs and traditions, have the task to salvage what they can of our way of life, while dissenting strongly from those customs that they feel we have outgrown or ought to outgrow. There is no doubt that not only Africa but the whole world stands to gain by letting these perspectives come out in the writings of our women.”29
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2. Note: A term originating in W. Africa, a griot is the living memory of the people, a walking cultural encyclopedia of the community; a griot’s repertoire is huge, containing simple stories, ancient myths, historical traditions and poetry.


7. ibid, p.3


10. Note: Dystopia, a term used to deconstruct the concept of an idyllic utopia.

11. James, Adeola, ed. *In Their Own Voices* p. 129

12. ibid, p49


15. Note: Walker explains that although womanism describes women’s shared emotions, friendship, culture and feminism, ‘womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’ it does not necessarily lead to a separatist politics.

16. Note: For example Achebe, Ngugi, Nuruddin Farah, A.K. Armah, Okot P’Bitek etc.


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23. James, Wendy, op.cit, pp 124,126,127

25. James, Wendy, op.cit p127


27. James, Wendy, op.cit pp 132, 134, 135, 136


29. Ngcobo, Lauretta, op.cit, p82