

Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun

---

**Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An  
Afrocentric Discourse**

Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun

Associate Professor

English Department – Faculty of Arts

Ain Shams University

white sister told me  
all women are one  
united in de face  
of chau'vism  
(pa'don my engilis)

...

I ...

“dumb” black woman

laughed mirthlessly on

flicking away tears

of pain from eyes.

I looked up

from my chore

on the kitchen floor

where, new found sister

had ordered me to be on knees...

“Sisterhood”

–

Nkiru

Uwechia

African Women writers share a long and traumatic history of colonialism, patriarchy and slavery. Despite the geographical diversity, the experience of colonial and racial subjugation unites them. African women writers' political

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

awareness enlarges their communal vision that, in effect, transcends gender issues. This paper contends that the political, geographical, and social factors problematize the status of African and all women of color, which thus calls for a different approach than that of Western feminism. In her influential essay 'Under Western Eyes', Chandra Mohanty underlines the misconceptions prevalent in most Western feminist writing that "discursively colonize(s) the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular "third world woman" – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (53). Hence, the African female writer has a heavier burden to carry than the white, which explains the reluctance to embrace the label 'feminist'. The colonization of Africa has certainly complicated the issue of gender relations, rendering the concept of Western feminism deficient in its tenets.

In articulating the inequities of the traditional gender roles that African women experience, African women writers, like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and others, try to raise awareness to contend with the socio-political challenges inherent in African society. This paper tackles the novel *The Slave Girl* (1977) written by the Nigerian-British writer Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta, who focuses on a painful historical era in Africa's history, that of slavery. It seeks to demonstrate how the coalescence of women's fate with that of the homeland underlies Emecheta's community's consciousness, which in turn becomes expressive of her womanist perspective. The womanist agenda that Emecheta adopts addresses the multiple oppressions experienced by black women, as well as many Third world women in general. Alice Walker's

---

**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

concept of ‘womanism’ and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s theory of African womanism, formulate the backdrop of this paper. In addition, the study will avail itself of critical works by Gina Wisker, Florence Stratton, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Keith Booker and Lloyd Brown that analyze writings of black women writers.

Alice Walker, Afro-American novelist and poet, was the first to introduce the term “Womanist” in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), which is a collection of articles and reviews about the contending issues of gender and racism that disrupt black people’s lives. According to Walker’s definition, a womanist is,

A black feminist or feminist of color,  
(who) “loves other women, sexually and  
/or nonsexually; appreciates and prefers  
women’s culture, women’s emotional  
flexibility...and women’s strength.  
Sometimes loves individual men,  
sexually and/ or nonsexually.  
Committed to survival and wholeness of  
entire people, male and female” (xi).

Walker’s ‘womanism’ underlines the uniqueness of the black woman’s experiences and conditions as she states: “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (xii). Her womanist concept encompasses a communal vision that emphasizes the inadequacy of Western feminism in relating to the problems and concerns of African women. As Dionne Blasingame maintains: “Womanists situate the political, socio-cultural, and historical oppressions based upon the intersectionality of race, class, and gender on black women” (39). On that account, ‘womanism’ is deemed more

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

expressive of the complexity of the multiple oppressions that black women and women of color, in general, endure.

Notably, the term 'feminism' in the African popular context is largely rejected, as it is associated with radical versions of Western feminism. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi underlines the difference between feminism and womanism: "Feminism appears more rhetorical, polemical, and individualistic in its thrust, paling before womanism, which is communal in its orientation and is ideologically like a palaver in which the destiny of distressed peoples can be urgently discussed in a meaningful context to avert disaster, not just to talk abstractly" (119). Moreover, feminism is regarded more as a man-hating ideology that undermines marriage and motherhood, and hence is incongruous with the African women's "inclusive, mother-centered ideology, with its focus on caring--familial, communal, national, and international" (Ogunyemi 114).

African women writers are motivated by a sense of social responsibility that goes even beyond gender issues as they grapple with political and economic issues. Molaria Ogundipe-leslie maintains: "Being aware of oneself as a Third World person implies being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives on and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies" (11). Hence, feminism as a Western ideology does not seem in consonance with the African women writers' social milieu. Carollette Norwood avers that African Women's reluctance to embrace the label 'feminist' "reflects their critique of Western feminists to confront material oppression, to move beyond theory to activism and their advocacy of a universal idea of shared sisterhood irrespective of social-cultural inequalities" (66-67).

---

**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

Alternatively, womanism goes in tandem with the African women vernacular discourse. Ogunyemi promulgates that womanism represents “a tradition and code for communal solidarity” (10). However she believes that ‘African womanism’ is even more comprehensive than Afro-American womanism, as the latter still overlooks African particularities. African womanism addresses issues that relate to both women and men, seeking the transformation of society into becoming more equitable. Ogunyemi describes the Nigerian (African) woman concern for improving the quality of life itself for both sexes:

Genuinely democratic, her ideology is integrative rather than singularly adversarial, as it is child directed and community centered. She warns against disintegration, as she is conscious of the complexities of African history and culture. She dramatizes women's moves for negotiating for a place in the tackling of problems peculiar to emergent nations. (5)

As an African female writer, Buchi Emecheta feels committed to her vision of womanhood in her Third World reality. The essence of Emecheta’s authenticity lies in merging of her protagonists’ existence within their historical and social milieu. According to Florence Stratton, Emecheta’s female characters are complex characters whose personalities are defined and whose destinies are determined by their interaction with their environment (116). Her novel, *The Slave Girl*, is set at the beginning of the twentieth century when the Nigerian people exchanged the colonial rule of the Portuguese with that of the British. Respectively, like her mother country, Ojebeta, the slave girl, exchanges one master for another. She has to endure the double burden

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

of patriarchy and colonialism, of gender and class. The commodization and exploitation of the female protagonist coincides with the European colonization and enslavement of the Nigerian society. As Ogunyemi remarks:

The African women writers are concerned with more than merely the fates of women in society; they also examine the effects of different forms of oppression on the fates of men, children, communities, and nations in a continent that has been raped and remains disoriented from continued sacking and pillaging by rapacious people and their local underlings.... In Emecheta's oeuvre, for instance, Nigeria's subjugation is as cogent in her colonial and postcolonial discourse as the black man's and black woman's second-class citizenship. (118)

Hence, the hegemonic systems of colonialism and patriarchy conflate to subjugate the African woman as well as the man, physically, economically and politically.

In an interview with Inny Marie Tiroye, Emecheta underlines the inclusiveness of her narrative perspective: "The main themes of my novels are African society and family: the historical, social, and political life in Africa as seen by a woman through events. I always try to show that the African male is oppressed and he too oppresses the African woman... I have not committed myself to the cause of African women only, I write about Africa as a whole" (49). Emecheta's commitment to an Afro-centric vision in all her novels demonstrates what Paul Ricoeur regards as "a capacity for ethical-political agency [which] is tied to gaining a narrative sense of identity" (15). Naming the female protagonist, Ojebeta Ogbanje, after her own mother,

**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

highlights the autobiographical aspect of her writing. The name itself has symbolic connotations, as Ogunyemi points out:

Besides identifying her as a restless spirit, destined for an uncertain future, the name also marks her as everywoman, reenacting the ancient drama of enslavement within the family through a betrayal of trust. The harshness and humiliation of Ojebeta's life recall colonialism. On the personal level, besides representing Emecheta's mother destiny and Emecheta's unenviable heritage, as a jinx, Ogbanje speaks to the ups and downs in a writer's career in which the very act of writing and its reception are always problematic and in need of mediation. (249)

Emecheta's subtle and searing critique of the oppression of African women calls attention to the special problems of women in African society. However, in her essay, "Feminism with a small f", she admonishes the attempt to read her narratives from a Western feminist perspective. She firmly believes that the concerns of the African woman does not concur with that of the Western feminists. She avers:

Being a woman, and African born I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I didn't know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f... for the majority of women of Africa, real achievement – as I see it – is to make her immediate environment happy as is

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

possible under the circumstances, by tending crops or giving comfort. But she still has higher aspirations and will achieve more when those cleverly structured artificial barriers are removed (183, 185).

Emecheta's stance as an African writer is in tune with Oladele Taiwo description of African women writers as "custodians of traditions" (187), whose storytelling suggest a collective identity that incorporates their cultural heritage. Taiwo words echo Walker's womanist perspective, as she describes her experience of writing: "I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lives, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and own continuity"(13). This communal bond forms an intrinsic component of African womanism, which distinguishes its interests from those of Western white feminists. As M. Keith Booker points out: "The roles of women in traditional African societies often differ substantially from those of Western societies, but also because issues of race and class may interact with issues of gender differently in contemporary Africa than in the West" (95).

*The Slave Girl* depicts the plight of women in the colonized patriarchal society that still treated women as property. Emecheta's subtle weaving between women's destiny and their community is noted from the beginning of the novel. The people in Ojebeta's village believe that the arrival of the Europeans has brought destruction to their world in the form of 'Felenza' (influenza), that "carried away the men who were men, and now the survivors had been left only with the 'ghosts of men'" (79). The "Felenza" is believed to be the "white man's (Potokis) death. They shoot it into the air and [the African people] breathe it and die" (25). The epidemic kills Ojebeta's parents and many

---



**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

others, which make her feel “the whole world was dying, one by one” (27). Her life is set against the broad historical background of her community, as the narrator wryly comments:

The people of Ibuza- at a time when it was glorious to be an Englishman, when the reign of the great Queen Victoria’s son was coming to its close, when the red of the British Empire covered almost half the map of the world, when colonization was at its height, and Nigeria was being taken over by Great Britain- did not know that they were not still being ruled by the Portuguese. The people of Ibuza did not realize that their country, to the last village, was being amalgamated and partitioned by the British. They knew nothing of what was happening; they did not know that there were ways of robbing people of their birthright than by war. The African of those days was very trusting. (15)

In effect, contemporary events in colonial Africa reflect on Ibuza, Ojebeta's village and consequently on her life as well.

The parallelism between Ojebeta's destiny and that of her colonized country reveals Emecheta's womanist consciousness of the interconnectedness of the private and the public. The enslavement of women corresponds to the country's exploitation by the colonizer, as Emecheta expresses it so succinctly in her novel: “So as Britain was emerging from war once more victorious, and claiming to have stopped the slavery which she had helped to spread in all her black colonies, Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters” (179). *The Slave Girl* depicts the

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

journey of a young girl from slavery to 'a freedom' that debunks the typical happy ever after.

The novel centers on Ogbange Obejeta, whose parents die six years after her birth, leaving her and her two elder brothers to fend for themselves. Owezim, the elder brother, runs away, while Okolie the younger and lazy brother, sells Ojebeta off as a slave to Ma Palagada, a distant rich relative. From then on, the reader follows Ojebeta's bildungsroman as she grows into womanhood. Her life of servitude, with the other slave companions, subjects her to the harsh realities of life. After Ma Palagada's death, Ojebeta returns to her village and engages in a small trade with the little money she has saved during her stay at the Palagadas. The story ends with her marriage to Jacob, an educated and hardworking young man, who is obliged to pay her bridal money to Clifford, the successor slave owner, so that she can be considered 'free'.

Ironically, Ojebeta's marriage only augments her servile status. Emecheta is rather critical of the women's docile acceptance of their fates, "as possessions without freedom or privilege... as sexual objects to be abused and sexually exploited at will by men" (Brown 58). The money Jacob pays to the Palagadas is her slave price to finalize his status as her new owner. She expresses her gratitude to her husband – her new owner: "Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master" (179). Surprisingly, Ojebeta seems content with how things turn out in the end: "She didn't want more of life; she was happy with her husband, happy to be submissive, even to accept an occasional beating that was what she had been brought up to believe a wife should expect" (173-174). The way her life turns out in the end seems quite shocking. The reader expects that after leaving the Palagadas, Ojebeta' would enjoy freedom and financial independence.

---

**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

Regrettably, she succumbs easily to the stereotypical role that society has prescribed for its women.

Emecheta's depiction of the oppressive reality of the slave girl and her lack of a rebellious spirit throws the ball into women's court, reminding them that the change in their status will be realized, only if they start rethinking of themselves as free and worthy human beings. Custom has turned women into a property whose ownership is transferred from one owner to another. Aunt Uteh, a close relative and a staunch defender of Igbo traditions, tries to console Ojebeta when she complains of her brother's shameful behavior, selling her in return for eight pounds, which he spent on his festive youth procession:

No woman is ever free. To be owned by a man is a great honour. So perhaps in a sense your brother was not too much in the wrong. He only took the money that by right belonged to the first son of the family, Owezim – he alone, and not Okolie, has the right to sell you, or borrow money on your head, or spend your bride price. (158)

Aunt Uteh's supposedly consoling words to Ojebeta, in regard to her brother's selfishness and vanity, sum up the tragic and demeaning situation of women in Nigerian society.

Slavery in Emecheta's novel seems more like a state of mind that drives a woman to obliterate her selfhood and surrender her existence to her master. Brown comments on how Emecheta dwells on the emotional and moral implications of slavery itself:

## **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

Emecheta insists in this novel on the degree to which the victim-the slave in this instance-contributes to her own victimization, by allowing her self to accept the role of victim. Quite apart from the actual brutality and degradation in being slaves, the most crucial difficulty in the lives of these young women (and a handful of men) is the degree to which they have developed a slave mentality. This mentality allows them to accept, even support, the status quo. (57)

The bleak reality that Emecheta depicts reveals that women can become their own worst enemies. Ojebeta fails to unhinge her mind from the shackles of servitude. She continues her life of enslavement with her husband as her new master to whom she is grateful for his kindness despite his occasional beatings.

Emecheta shows slavery as an indigenous system in Africa, even before the European slave trade; thus revealing African complicity in that trade. Ma Palagada together with Ma Mee, another big market woman, condone 'human purchase' as a system: "Where would we be without slave labour, and where would some of these unwanted children be without us" (64-65). Ma Palagada's exploitation of the girls, together with her daughter Victoria's vicious treatment of the slave girls like "a bitch with puppies" (113), demonstrate women's responsibility in the reproduction of oppression through the perpetuation of slavery. Akoete Amouzou avers that by using Ojebeta "to explore the general condition of enslavement of woman, Emecheta explains that women are

**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

also creators of sufferings to other women and consequently, there is need to ‘educate both’” (18).

Slavery serves as a trope that underlines the subservient status of women whether she is a slave or 'free'. According to the traditions of Ibuza society, “a girl was owned, in particular, by her father or someone in the place of her father or her older brother, and then, in general, by her group or homestead” (157). Okolie sells his little sister into slavery, regarding the act as a male prerogative, to preserve a fake macho image in a village ritual. He shamelessly admits: “I deserve to have the money I need so badly for my coming-of-age dance. What does it matter if I have to trade my sister to get it? She will be looked after there, better than I can afford to do in Ibuza.... This is the only way she can survive and grow into adulthood” (37). His feelings of remorse are only for,

violating the custom. He had no right to claim any money that his sister might fetch. Now that their father was dead, her bride price when she grew up belonged by right to his older brother Owezim. Okolie’s share would have been a pound or so; but now, not only had he sold his sister for less than half the price she would later have had paid for her in marriage, he was also keeping all that money for himself. (80)

Ma Palagada's slave girls are compared to “wooden dolls” (87), when Ojebeta first lays eyes on them. Slavery has impinged on their humanity, sucking the sense of life from their existence. Chiago, the older among Ma Palagada’s slave girls, sympathizes with Ojebeta’s crying to keep her birth charms with her: “Chiago looked helplessly at the little girl who was doing her utmost to cling on to her

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

individuality. She did not know that no slave retained any identity: whatever identity they had, was forfeited the day money was paid for them. She didn't wish to rob this child of the small shred of self-respect she still had" (72).

The plight of women in Emecheta's novels stems from their subservient allegiance to their cultural patriarchal codes. Emecheta sees that women's powerlessness could be largely circumvented through education. Katherine Frank points to education as a potent means of women's liberation in Emecheta's novels: "Education constitutes power in Emecheta's books in two ways... it equips women to be economically independent... education also gives women a vision of human experience beyond the narrow confines of their lives" (23). The character of Ojebeta undergoes a noticeable transformation as she joins the church's school. Ironically, at times, she even feels grateful, having been bought by Ma Palagada:

Gone was her abrasive Ibuza accent; she now spoke like a girl born in Onitsha, with rounded "Rs" and slowness of delivery, each word drawn out. ...Her small, square, white basket \_ Ma had bought one for each of them \_ was almost full of clothes. She had enough to eat, and she went to Sunday School. The harsher aspects of being a Palagada slave girl receded temporarily... she joined the others in her gratitude. (107)

She has become an accomplished young woman who attends church and has learned to read and write. However, the role of the church is rather dubious, as Emecheta notes that "the English brought with them a hypocritical kind of Christianity" (20), that endorses slavery. Mrs. Simpson, the wife of the new United Africa Company chief, is in charge

---

**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

of the local Church Missionary Society School and, “in her heart of hearts regards these women as having the brains of children” (104). Also, the Bishop, who takes money and gifts from the Palagadas, “blessed the labour of their hands, and told them to obey their masters and work diligently in all they were employed to do... The salves and servants, happy to have been blessed, walked back to their designated places at the back of the church, away from their superiors” (SG 110). Although going to church and learning to read and write makes the slave girls feel special, yet it ironically seems to make them more at peace with their servility.

The metaphoric significance of the theme of slavery resides in the depiction of the affiliation between Nigeria’s political and economic dependence and Ojebeta’s enslavement, as Ogunyemi remarks:

Not only is woman an object for barter, her development is arrested, as the title of the book indicates, she remains eternally a minor. Emecheta’s impassioned warning restates the oft- ignored truth that a country’s destiny inevitably parallels its women’s.... She demonstrates how intricately our political destiny is intertwined with the personal; exiling or marginalizing women, men inadvertently hurt themselves and the country. (249)

Ojebeta's development comes to a halt when she agrees to marry, and once again she relinquishes her freedom, but this time out of her own will. She shaves her head and burns her hair, to escape her aunt’s husband use of it in a magic ploy to force her to marry his relative. Her decision to elope with Jacob constitutes a pivotal point in the story, as the narrator avers:

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

Like her *ogbange* charms, her hair seemed to symbolize her freedom. Would she ever be free? Must she be a slave all her life, never being allowed to do what she liked? Was it the fate of all Ibuza women or just her own? Still it would have been better to be a slave to a master of your own choice, than to one who did not care or even know who you were. Jacob would be a better choice, especially if her brothers in Lagos should happen to approve of him. (168)

Ojebeta's elopement recalls Akunna's defiance of family and social taboos in Emecheta's first novel, *The Bride Price* (1976). However, Ojebeta's defiance is incomplete, and in fact stunted by her final acquiescence to give in to her community's stereotypical female role.

As an African woman writer, Emecheta feels committed to her vision of womanhood in her Third world reality, which implies being politically conscious of the various perspectives that shape this reality. Motherhood constitutes a central trope in the African, and in turn, in the womanist discourse. Ogunyemi remarks that children are central in the African consciousness. However, this maternal spirit is concomitant with the expectation of exploitation. A girl is expected to follow her mother's footsteps, as Ogunyemi notes that, "the womanish girl is a living criticism of the system that assumes she too must be exploited and overworked... Emecheta has often times used slavery as a trope in many of her novels, in consonance with the black tradition" (9). Ojebeta's servile status clearly represents a cultural symptom of the local African slavery system. Another example of the humiliating denigration of women is the midwife who is denied entrance to the hut to help deliver



**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

Ojebeta's mother, because she is menstruating. It is a taboo that augments women's slavish existence, where her biological state circumscribes her freedom of mobility. Also, when Ojebeta's father died her mother was "confined to her hut like a prisoner until her months of mourning were over...she was forbidden to visit the stream, to bathe, to enter any hut where the man of the family had a title" (28-29).

Emecheta's womanism assimilates her characters' existence into their cultural traditions and their superstitious rituals. She refers to the concept of 'Chi', "the personal god to whom every Ibuza individual appealed in time of trouble" (17), and to whom Umeadi prays for the survival of baby Ojebeta. In her intense keenness to preserve her child's life, she runs home not minding her bleeding after giving birth. Her intrepidity causes the narrator to note the Ibuza women's exceptional endurance and tenacity, and the peculiar choice of their babies' names:

In common with most Ibuza women, she treated the event in a very straightforward manner, requiring none of the paraphernalia that now attends the birth of a child. A pregnant Ibuza woman would simply always carry a cooking knife with her, just in case she gave birth to her baby on her way to or from the market or farm. If she were lucky, she might have someone with her who could cut the cord; if not, she would cut the cord herself, rest a while, put her new baby on her back and thread her way home. As a result many bore names such as Uzo Onitsha – "born on the way

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

to market” – and Nwa Oboshi – “born on the way to the Oboshi river” (19).

To procure her daughter's safety from any evil spirits that could claim her life, the mother also seeks the help of her ‘dibia’, the native doctor, who tells her:

Your child will stay this time if you tie her with safety charms. These must consist of cowries, tops of tins... and real bells from metal. You see, she has an agreement with her friends in the land of the dead, to keep coming and mocking you. But this time she is impressed by your hospitality and wants to remain here as long as she can. It is our duty to make her stay as long as possible (18).

By making her daughter wear cowries, and drawing tattoos on her face, Umeadi is actually performing a tribal ritual that is reflective of an Igbo tradition.

Emecheta's vivid portrayal of minute details of the life of the women in the traditional Igbo society, accentuate her focus on the authentication of her cultural heritage. Florence Stratton believes that Emecheta's novels provide a faithful representation of African women as she states: “The essence of Emecheta's realism, lies... in her portrayal of ‘the inseparability of [her] protagonists’ existence from their social and historical context” (113). The depiction of the market place represents another attestation to the writer's vivid portrayal of the village community. It seems to be the only place where women really enjoy and exercise their individuality. It belies the negative image of African women as powerless and subhuman. Ogunyemi emphasizes the socio-economic significance of the market place , as she describes it, “as a place where one can come and go freely, transact business with little or no discrimination... a

prototype of womanist haven” (51-52). Emecheta also refers to the Aba market women’s riot, that broke out to stop the colonial administration from collecting taxes from market women. Ma Palagada rejects the idea of taxing women since it goes against their customs, as she maintains: “I’m not paying any tax, that much I know. Maybe when they see how determined we are, they will let our custom be – the custom that says only our men should pay for their heads, because they own us” (133). Surprisingly, no man took part in this riot, which was wholly organized by women from different tribes, although these women were main providers of their families. This in effect, reflects Emecheta’s womanist stance, which encompasses the different aspects of the lived experience by which the African women overturn the marginalization foisted on them.

Despite living in England since the early sixties, Emecheta has never “severed the umbilical cord that links her with Oboshi in Ibuza, the primal mother who reigns over the Oboshi River and controls the ancestral mothers who inspire her” (Ogunyemi 222). She succinctly manages to weave a number of complex issues, within a simple plot, and in an easy lucid language. The narrative flows in a straightforward manner. It is also notable that the omniscient narrator in the novel does not always express an impartial outlook. The narrator wryly comments on the younger generation of Ibuza who took English names:

They all found it fashionable to take European names. So Ogbanje Ojebeta added the English name of Alice...It became a common type of occurrence in Ibuza at that time among those who wanted to show how modern they were.... The trend reached such a pass that people

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

became shy of their native Ibuza names.... The irony was that the process would eventually come full circle and people would reject their English names; but that was to be in days of Independence, after the end of colonialism. That was still in the future. (154-155)

Emecheta's literary style accentuates her attachment to her African language and culture. She mixes English words with local ones creating her own distinctive language. The characters use Nigerian English, blending Ibo words with English ones such as 'felenza' for influenza, 'Kinsheni' for kitchen, 'Germanis' for Germans. The use of proverbs in conversation--a very popular African tradition-- also characterizes the speech of several characters, rendering it more vivid and realistic. Chinua Achebe stresses the role of proverbs in African literature: "The proverb is a palm with which words are eaten" (6). Being a shrewd businesswoman, Ma Palagada outsmarts the greedy and famished Okolie by overstuffing him with delicious food and wine, remarking that, "a hungry man was an angry man" (65).

In her portrayal of African cultural practices in a patriarchal colonized society, Emecheta refrains from providing conclusive endings and charting out solutions. She aptly weaves her narrative "through an African Woman's eyes" (173), which demonstrates her success in establishing a counter discourse to mainstream Western feminism's polarized perspective. Emecheta's Afro-centered context constitutes the premise for the expression of her womanism. Oguynyemi's note on the African women writers' creative role in their society is a case in point: "Women's texts have political contexts, criticizing failure in the domestic and public domains. They serve as the public conscience" (103).

**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

Emecheta's novel has conveyed the polemics of womanism with perspicuity and depth. Her novel reflects the symbiotic, but idiosyncratic, relationship between African womanism and Western feminism. She astutely blends the cultural and the political details into which her characters are contextualized. Emecheta's womanist approach calls to mind the renowned Egyptian novelist Latifa Al-Zayyat's passionate avowal:

I believe that woman's status (is) a problem for the whole of society, that women could not be free unless the whole of society were free. In a deteriorating society, the situation of women becomes unspeakably worse. As a woman myself, woman's cause (is) mine. But I (am) not totally consumed by the issue because I (am) interested in my country as a whole, which include(s) all its men and women (284-285).

Her seminal work *Al Bab Al Maftouh* narrates the heroine's battle against the stifling and sexist patriarchal authority, intertwined with Egypt's national struggle against imperialism. However, while Laila persists in her struggle for freedom, on both the personal and public levels, Ojebeta quickly forfeits her fiery spirit and independence. Her enslavement is equated with that of her country, since "no woman can be said to be free as long as her country or her people are in some way under foreign control or are exploited by military sons-of-the soil" (Ogunyemi 254). Significantly, just as the novel indicts Western colonization, it also exposes those socio-cultural mores and taboos upheld by the patriarchal system that continues to oppress women. Emecheta's womanism envisages a communal pattern of life

### **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

where the triple factors – race, gender and class – continue to haunt black women in particular, and the community at large. She draws attention to the multiple facets of oppression experienced by African women, affirming the need for a different canon that is integrative rather than exclusionary.

## References

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Anchor Books, 1994. Print.
- Al-Zauyat, Latifa and Marilyn Booth. *The Open Door*. American University in Cairo, 2000. Print.
- Al-Zayyat, Latifa. "In Her Own Mirror" in *Women Writing in Africa: The Northern Region*, edited by Fatima Sadiqi, The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1993, pp. 280-285.
- Amouzou, Akoete. "Ideological Ambiguities and Social Relevance in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*." *Revue du CAMES*, Vol. 2, No.2, 2014, 13-24.
- Blasingame, Dionne. "The Trauma of Chattel Slavery: A Womanist Perspective Women on Georgia in Early American Times." MA thesis. Georgia State University, 2012. [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english\\_theses/138](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses/138)
- Booker, M. Keith. *The African Novel in English: An Introduction*. Heinemann, 1998.
- Brown, Lloyd W. *Women Writers in Africa*. Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Emecheta, Buchi. *The Slave Girl*. George Brazillen, 1977.
- . 'Feminism with a small "F"!.' *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference*, edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988, pp.173-85.

## **Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---

- Frank, Catherine. 'Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa.' *Women in African Literature Today*, edited by Eldred Durosimi Jones, Eustace Palmer, Marjorie Jones, James Currey Ltd, 1987, pp. 14-34.
- Mohanty, Chandra. 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse.' *Feminist Review*, vol. 30, Autumn 1988, pp.65-88.
- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonyo. *African Wo/Man Palava, The Nigerian Novel by Women*. The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. 'The Female Writer and Her Commitment.' *Women in African Literature Today*, edited by Edward Durosimi Jones, Eustace Palmer, Marjorie Jones, James Currey Ltd, 1987, pp. 5-13.
- Norwood, Carlote. 'Perspective in Africana Feminism; Exploring Expressions of Black Feminism/Womanism in African Diaspora.' *Sociology Compass*, vol.7, Issue 3, March 2013, pp. 225-236.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary African Literature and The Politics of Gender*. Routledge, 1994.



**Dr. Magda Ahmed Naim Haroun**

---

Taiwo, Oladele. *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*. Macmillan, 1984.

Tioye, Inny Marie. An Interview with Buchi Emecheta. *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa*. Edited by Charlotte H. Burner, Heinemann, 1983.

Uwechia, Nkiru. "Sisterhood". *JENdA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, edited by Mary Dillard and Nkiru Nzegwu, Africa Resource Center, 1999.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. Harcourt Inc., 1983.

Wisker, Gina. *Post-Colonial And African American Women's Writing*. St. Martin's Press, 2000.

**Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*: An Afrocentric Discourse**

---