

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Gender, Motherhood and Slavery are the buzz-words in the discourse of Feminism which is all about the realization of women in gaining their freedom and rights. Motherhood and slavery are mostly seen to be correlated with the women and hence as the outcome of the patriarchal society. In biological aspect woman is seen as the weaker section of the society whose ultimate work is to please her husband, bear children for her husband, and then spend the rest of her life in nourishing and feeding her 'motherhood', which is believed to be one of the major requirements to become a complete woman. Women are being gendered in the socio-cultural context too. Their plight is not considered for being weak in gender, and they are always taken for granted. And this so-called gendering of men and women, or to say 'self' and 'other' has brought in the concept of 'gender discrimination'. Also, in such a gendered society, woman is seen as only an object. Because of such prejudiced notion of discrimination, men regard themselves to be the lord of the house and of the society as well; and that for being the male sex they can be chauvinists. But, the sad part is that women let themselves to be suppressed, as if they are habituated with the act of enslavement and that they are not seen to be struggling as much as they should have been to free themselves from this so long prevailing slavery of the female sex.

The purpose of this project is to make a broad study of some select novels of one of the great postmodern African novelists, Buchi Emecheta who has devoted herself to the cause of women and their freedom and rights, who has made persistent efforts towards elevating the relegated class through her huge contribution of writing. She has not only herself broken through the unjustifiable norms of the society, but also has tried her best through her writings to make the women realize what and how they have been treated as and what they actually deserve. In other words, it will be a study on how Emecheta has become a successful writer in giving her voice through her works to the so-called voiceless part of the society, which has been dominated, marginalized, suppressed, and looked down upon for such a long period of time. Also, it will be to make a study on how she has presented the urge in women for gaining an identity of their own at the same time while retaining the family life with all the restrictions.

Among the early works of Emecheta, *“The Slave Girl”* (1977) as well as *“The Joys of Motherhood”* (1979) project a period from 1910 to 1960, the early part of colonization. Hence, they present a society where a lot of changes took place because of the coming of the colonization. Emecheta presents a society with her real life experiences that she had experienced because of the commingling of the African values with that of the colonization. The protagonist of *“The Joys of Motherhood”* faces such difficulties which occurred because of the collision of two cultures. *“The Slave Girl”*, i.e. Ogbanje Ojebeta, meets a rather modern society in the market town of Onitsha as she grew up there. Emecheta’s *“In the Ditch”* (1972) and *“Second-Class Citizen”* (1974) are highly autobiographical which present the author’s own experiences right from the early childhood, being denied of education for being a girl child, having a failed marriage and a devastating divorce and then rearing and bearing the five children of hers as the single parent. These two novels are highly based on what it takes to be a woman and how a woman suffers a great number of difficulties for being the second or the weaker sex.

Women like Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba etc. have not only realized their mistakes and lacking but also, have been trying to deconstruct the patriarchal society for them through their practical lives and for others, through their writings. Buchi Emecheta’s works primarily deal with the portrayal of African women. The main characters of her novels show what it means to be a woman and a mother in a Nigerian society. Emecheta looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children can sometimes be the only terms to define feminism and womanhood. Through her works she tries to show how gender intersects and engages with education, poverty and enslavement. Her postmodern writings show how even the coming of colonialism and the post colonialism could not provide the womenfolk any help or support and how they instead have made their lives ‘worse’ in many ways. What Emecheta wants to portray through her writings is that no matter if it is a patriarchal society or a colonial one or even a postcolonial society; women are and would be treated the same way or even in a worse way, until and unless they raise their voice for their rights and freedom. If we look at her own life we can see how she had to face all the social, racial and gender discriminations, but she could gain an identity of her own only because she could deconstruct all the barriers and could let her voice be ‘heard’.

Most of Emecheta’s works reflect the story of her own life. All her hard time struggles and the bad experiences that she suffered during her early life became the plot

of most of her writings. In short, it can be said that Buchi Emecheta's autobiography, "*Head Above Water*" (1986), contains most of the plots of her novels. For instance her first book, "*In the Ditch*", got published in the year 1972, and depicts the struggles and sufferings of Buchi Emecheta herself. The plot of this novel revolves round the struggles of the central character named Adah, who is forced to live alone, and to struggle while working as a librarian to support her five children which is very much relevant with the life of the novelist herself. Emecheta had an unhappy and violent marriage, even though it was a love marriage. She was not given any freedom to make an identity of her own. Hence, she had to leave her husband at the age of twenty two. She worked as a librarian to earn money in order to support her five children. "*In the Ditch*" is very much autobiographical in tone, where Emecheta records what it means to be a 'woman' and what it takes to gain the identity for a 'woman. This novel of Buchi Emecheta, describes well that how a woman is 'gendered' at every point of her life, how she is neglected and how she gets nothing for being a 'woman'. But the best part of her novels is that her female characters are much more active and powerful than the male ones who are portrayed as lazy and passive. As for in this novel, we have found the central character Adah, powerful and strong enough to struggle for her life and also for the lives of her five children. And she, the single parent of those five children, happens to give them a good life while qualifying herself with more degrees and creating an identity of her own.

Much of Emecheta's works focus on sexual politics, racial and sexual prejudice and gender discrimination based on her own experiences both as a single parent and a black woman living in Britain. In her works, we find women subjugation or the patriarchal order of the society where women are treated as below the level of men. She herself suffered the pains of the patriarchal norms in her early life as she was not given education the way her younger brother had got. Due to gender discrimination of her time, she was kept at home while her brother was sent to school. These things are very much prominent in her major works like "*Second-Class Citizen*" and "*The Slave Girl*". Here, she shows the 'unwanted-ness' of 'women' in the patriarchal society. Her novel, "*Second-Class Citizen*" explores her thorough exploration of the gender discrimination in the native Nigerian society and the African immigrants in Britain. Adah is the central character here in this novel, who is a second-class citizen for being a black woman, in Nigeria. Her parents deny her any kind of proper education and eventually arrange her marriage, which is believed in a typical society that daughters are born to be married

away and sons are born to be educated and to carry on the heritage. And hence, Emecheta wants to convey through this novel of hers that no matter what, no matter how desperate the woman is to attain education, no matter how much she struggles to have an identity of her own, she is always looked down upon and her life is decided by her parents at first and then by her husband after her marriage. It is all because of the set norms and conditions of the society, i.e. because she is regarded as the second-class citizen she should be governed by the first-class ones, i.e. the males. Thus, through the experiences of her own life she throws light on those parts of the so-called patriarchal society where women are being subjugated, marginalized, suppressed, dominated and made the 'other' of the male 'self'.

Emecheta's "*The Bride Price*" (1976) is a novel set in post-colonial Nigeria. Here, in the novel, Emecheta has exposed the evil custom done in the name of marriage, i.e. bride price. As the title itself suggests, the storyline of the novel deals with the concept of the bride price custom in a typical Nigerian society. Okonkwo, the step father of the heroine Aku-Nna, was an ambitious man. He aspired to become the chief of their village. And therefore, he eagerly waited for Aku-Nna to start her menstruation, so that he could marry her off with some wealthy man and get a huge amount of bride price in exchange of her. There was no genuine father-daughter love in their relationship. It was as though Okonkwo wanted his 'gradually blossoming' daughter only for the bride price that he would get in her marriage. A daughter's insecure position even in her own family is well presented in the novel. Also, the story is a mixture of many typical and modern ideas like; girl education, a woman's raised voice, a woman's fight against the tradition, a woman's worth through the custom of bride price, a woman's failure at the hands of the social taboos etc.

"*The Slave Girl*", another major work of Buchi Emecheta, shows how a 'girl' is treated and what place she is given in the Nigerian society. In this novel, Emecheta tries to project the lives of the black women; hence, she goes as far using slavery as universal condition of women in Nigeria. Here, Emecheta equates the institutions of slavery with marriage. This novel of Emecheta is like a mirror that reflects the happenings of the African culture during the time of the invasion of the Portuguese in Africa. How with the coming of colonialism and civilization women were crushed and shattered is well presented in this novel. Also, she manages to highlight the concept of marriage in the minds of the African women during that time. And, to do so, She here, also tries to

explore the conditions of the life of the protagonist Ojebeta, first as a slave and then as a wife. Through her changed status, from a slave girl to a wife is simply described as the change of masters and nothing more. It also depicts the limited opportunities and property status of women in the Nigerian patriarchal society. In this novel, she shows that the black women are stereotyped or made 'other', that they are still subjugated. Also, her works challenge the subaltern status of black women both within their own race and community and in the larger web society. Emecheta's attention to gender and racial differences is therefore coupled with her investigation of how these overlap with education, poverty and enslavement in women's quest for self-determination and empowerment. Her writings document the author's multilayered yet interesting identities, the 'diasporic' single woman, the sociologist observing grim urban realities, her African myths and traditions that clashed against modernization and her continents enslaved traumatic historical past.

In "*The Slave Girl*", the protagonist, Ogbanje Ojebeta was sold by her younger brother at a very early age. Since then she became a slave among many other slaves in the Palagada house. She kept on hoping that her brother would one day return and would take her back to her people because that was how he had told her before parting. She came to her senses only when she had heard the stories of slavery and how her fellow slaves were sold by their own people. Hurt and broken, she had spent a great many days in the Palagada house bearing all the tortures and maltreatments done by the children of the house. And at last, she was allowed freedom. She went back to her home, got married to a man she liked, only to be free under a 'new master'. Her experiences, her basic education, her knowledge and earnings as a business woman could not set her free from the clutches of tradition and culture. And the freedom that she got, came in the disguise of another form of 'slavery'. On the other hand, Aku-Nna in "*The Bride Price*", though she was never sold into slavery by anyone, she was enslaved by her situations and her surroundings. She was trapped by her societal believes, traditions, and customs. The traditional believes and the social taboos had the master-like control over her and she was thus forced to act accordingly.

Buchi Emecheta's very much remarkable work; "*The Joys of Motherhood*" is a novel that deals with what it means to be a 'mother' and what it actually takes to become one. In this novel, Emecheta presents a rather modern and colonized society, where the male-reign is still prevailing. Here we find how the colonized society impacted upon the

lives of the African women. The ways of living of the males, their freedom, their rights, their space etc. nothing changed. But, everything in regard of the women changed, shook and became sour. Even the joys of becoming a mother had become sour. Males kept marrying more and more wives and making love with them, and thus having more and more children. But, with the change of the traditional society and the shrinking of everything, the unity among the wives of the same husband broke and too many children became burden even to their own mothers. In this novel, Emecheta presents how the women were still gendered, made slaves in the name of women's duty and responsibility, and were given not even the minimum of freedom to enjoy and live their motherhood fully even in a colonized society and how women were still seen only as sex objects and the source of the child production.

Moreover, concepts like Feminism, Gender study, Colonialism, and Post-colonialism etc. will be used to interpret the texts. There have been a lot of surveys done to bring in the plight of the women and to let their hushed voices be heard. But it is quite evident that all the researches on women in the Third World have been shaped by the interests and standpoint of Western feminists who have taken the West as the primary referent. There has always been a monolithic binary of 'self' and 'other' which was brought by the West. Here, the 'self' is the men and the Western women. Irrespective of their class, color, creed, religion, individual sexuality; the Third World Women are treated and addressed as the 'same' or the 'women' as a group. Many critics have explained the dangers of failing to acknowledge these differences and they will further widen the gap between the white and the colored. The Third World women are gendered doubly; they are not only the 'other' to men but also to the Western women. Gender inequality remains a major barrier to human development. Women have made great strides since a long time, but they have not yet gained gender equality. The disadvantages facing women are a major source of inequality. All too often, women are discriminated against in health, education, home, family, society, political representation, making decision, labor, market, organizing etc. with negative repercussions for development of their capabilities and their freedom of choice.

According to many black feminists, Feminism failed to bring in any kind of solution to the black women and to air the problems of women as a radicalized class. Hence, the Black Feminists are seeking for a global outlook so that their plight and identity could be seen in its true color. Therefore the post colonial women, like a mine of

critical query incite attention. The re-presentation of such women got their proper shape and light in the hands of the renowned critics. Also, the Black Feminists who are scattered all over the globe are seeking answers for their unanswered questions. Buchi Emecheta is such a black writer from Africa, who herself declared in her essay, “Feminism with a small ‘f’”, “if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f” (pp. 179) emphasizing on the fact that how important it has become for the black women to present themselves to the world.

Though Buchi Emecheta’s novel, “*The Joys of Motherhood*” centers round a female character, yet throughout the whole novel it doesn’t feel like the women-folk are playing any independent and powerful role. The ‘gendering’ of the women-folk is well presented here in this novel. This gendering or even we can say that the violation of human rights goes to such a great extent that the joys of motherhood that once used to complete a woman became sour and burdensome. The feeling which is called or supposed to be divine, and the blessing of Gods and the feeling which take women to the zenith to be worshipped as mother goddesses; was torn down, broken and became bitter in the African society. Even, the ‘colonialism’ which we take as a way to modernism could not change the prevailing patriarchy or the male dominated society. Here, Emecheta not only critiques the idea of motherhood, but also the coming of colonialism that supported the ‘men-folk’ by giving them every right and power and ‘changed’ the women’s position by not allowing them even a room of their own.

In the novel, Emecheta has twice critiqued the idea of ‘motherhood’. At first, for giving it so much importance and necessity in a woman’s life; and secondly, for making the most wanted desire and pleasure, a sour and burdensome one. Emecheta presents Nnu Ego as the central character of the novel. Nnu Ego was the prideful daughter of Agbadi and Ona. She was very beautiful, pulpy and adamant like her mother. She was desired by many. But, as because she was the only remaining of Ona, Agbadi at first did not want to part with her, and nor did she. But, as time rolled by, Agbadi realized that she needs to be got married as because he was not going to stay by her side forever. And thus, Nnu Ego, the most precious asset of Agbadi was married off to Amatoku with an exchange of ‘bride price’. These words define well enough how women were actually sold in the name of marriage. The identity of women thus comes to a question mark. Even the very existence of women gets violated.

Later, in the novel *“The Joys of Motherhood”*, we come to know that Nnu Ego was rejected by her husband as because she could not conceive. A woman, in such kind of society, is categorized as juicy or barren on the basis of being able to conceive. The ability of a woman was supposed to decide her success or failure. In a male dominated society, motherhood was needed and celebrated for a purpose, i.e. to carry on the heritage of a family. It was not enjoyed or celebrated for the desire and wish of the woman. In the patriarchal society, “A woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman.” (pp. 65)

Pre-dominant patriarchy is the main reason which causes people to suffer from the social ills like the stereotyped other, social inequality, male violence, women subjugation, marginalization, slavery, female dependence on male and many more. All of these mainly cause women to suffer. Though the world has come to the modern stage, these social ills are still lurking. It is not that ‘women’ all over the world are undergoing the same pain. Some women have broken through all these social barriers, and many of them are trying through their writings to encourage other women to realize their deserving rights and freedom; and to bring others too from that ‘ditch’ to which the society has been pushing them.

Buchi Emecheta has dealt with many aspects relating to the deprivation and marginalization of the women folk. Her *“The Slave Girl”* pours light on such things only, where she presents the story of a slave girl whose life is nothing less than that of a slave. Under the core exploitation of the male dominated society, a woman needs to sacrifice her everything to please and satisfy her husband and the other male members of her life. In this novel, Emecheta goes as far using slavery as universal condition of women in Nigeria. The title of the last chapter of the novel, ‘Slave with a New Master’ itself talks the rest. Slavery, which has become a universal concern nowadays, is well represented in this novel. Emecheta presents how slavery is seen to the rich people through the character of Ma Mee, a well settled business woman, who says: “Where would we be without slave labor, and where would some of these unwanted children be without us?” (pp. 64).

In the novel when Ma Palagada’s only son Clifford expresses his desire to marry Ojebeta, in quite a demanding way. ‘Me? But I am only your mother’s slave.’ (pp. 117) was Ojebeta’s reply to the declaration of Clifford. To this Clifford said, ‘Have you never heard of masters marrying their female slaves, then?’ (pp. 117) This shows how women

were actually literally used by the powerful sex. The women folk have no kind of authority even upon their own lives. They are not even allowed to have their own consents upon their own marriages. It shows that no matter whatever the situation is at present, the prevailing conditions of the patriarchal society will always be there in the mindset of the people. For being slave, Ojebeta was seen just as an object and also treated thus. It was the custom among that master and slave relationship, where the slaves could be used and maltreated as the masters pleased. Hence, Clifford had such views in his mind for he had seen his own father Pa Palagada, using Chiago, a slave, for his all kinds of needs. That was why even though he returned from a distant land after completing his education, he thought that he was allowed to use the slaves as he desired and he also thought that he had the rights to do so because his parents owned the slaves.

Now, if we talk about the relegated section of the society, as many of the female critics say, it is important to deconstruct the 're-presentation' of one's history, and present it in its true form; so that the hushed voices of the unnoticed, uncared and neglected sections can be raised and heard by all. The followers of the feminists and the female critics talk about those relegated groups of persons of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion. They have always tried to give their voice to the voiceless. According to them, women subjugation or gender inequality is not just a classy word for 'oppressed', for the 'other', or for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie. Rather, it is a lot more than that where the women have got no value and their whole existence is crushed like anything. To make the wrong 'right', to do the injustice 'justice', to give the deprived 'rights', to provide the in-equals 'equality' and to give the inequity 'equity'; many writers have taken these into their consideration to highlight and to bring solution to make the society a healthy one.

The plight and predicaments of the sufferers have well been presented in the writings of many writers. Buchi Emecheta is just an example from the huge lot. Some of her contemporary writers like Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Mahesh Dattani, Toni Morrison etc. from all over the globe are trying to give their voices to the deprived and the marginalized so that they could do something for the betterment of the others. While making a study on the African context with special reference from the works of Buchi

Emecheta, the purpose of this work is to make a comparative study with the writings of the other writers of her country and of different countries and different continents.

WORK CITED:

Emecheta, Buchi. *In the Ditch*. London, UK: Pan Books Ltd., 1972.

---. *Second-Class Citizen*. Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1974.

---. *The Bride Price*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

---. *The Slave Girl*. United States of America: Ninth Paperback Printing, 2002.

---. *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann, 2008.

---. *Head Above Water*. London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1986.

---. Feminism with a small 'f!'. In Peterson, Kirsten Holst. (Ed.) *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988, pp. 173-185.