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**Chains of Tradition: Female Identity and Enslavement in Buchi Emecheta's 'The Slave Girl'**

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines the complex depiction of individuality in Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Slave Girl*, examining the life of Ojebeta, a young girl born into a patriarchal Igbo society in colonial Nigeria. From birth, Ojebeta is burdened with mystical significance as an Ogbanje—a spirit child believed to reincarnate repeatedly—leading her parents to adorn her with charms and tattoos that both mark her uniqueness and foreshadow her social isolation. After the death of her parents, she is sold into slavery by her brother, and her individuality is gradually eroded under the weight of domestic servitude and societal expectations. Though she eventually escapes physical slavery and chooses her husband, this choice only leads to another form of bondage within the traditional institution of marriage. Emecheta's narrative unearths the irony of freedom for women like Ojebeta, whose self-determination is consistently undermined by patriarchal structures. The novel critiques how traditional values, slavery, and marriage intersect to suppress women's autonomy and identity. Ultimately, Ojebeta's journey reflects the lifelong struggle for selfhood within a culture that repeatedly denies her agency, making *The Slave Girl* a poignant commentary on the loss and longing for individuality.

**Keywords:** Individuality, Patriarchy, Slavery, Identity, Gender roles**Introduction**

West African women writers have long positioned themselves as key voices in the literary protest against gender discrimination and the systemic oppression of women within patriarchal societies. Their works serve not merely as fictional narratives but as social commentaries that critically examine the deeply entrenched structures that marginalize women. Through their literature, these writers paint realistic and often harrowing portraits of women's suffering, thereby invoking empathy and sparking dialogue about social transformation.

A central theme in much of West African women's literature is the critique of patriarchal hegemony that defines women's roles as subordinate, silent, and self-sacrificing. Writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, and Buchi Emecheta have consistently

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challenged traditional cultural norms and ideologies that seek to limit women's autonomy and subject them to male authority (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997). These authors construct their female characters not merely as victims but as complex individuals with desires, ambitions, and the capacity for resistance.

Buchi Emecheta's work frequently interrogates the societal mechanisms that reduce women to commodities—beings to be inherited, bought, sold, or used to symbolize male status. Through her narratives, Emecheta exposes the multifaceted dimensions of female oppression, which includes economic dependency, sexual exploitation, and emotional subjugation. This critique is vividly illustrated in her novel *The Slave Girl* (1977), where the protagonist Ojebeta's life becomes a canvas for portraying the institutionalized nature of slavery and gender-based subjugation.

Slavery, as both a historical institution and metaphorical construct, is integral to understanding the layered forms of bondage experienced by women in the African context. The term "slave" is etymologically derived from the word "Slav," referring historically to the Slavic people who were often enslaved in Europe. In Africa, slavery existed in varying forms, from chattel slavery—where slaves were considered property with no rights—to more integrated systems where slaves could sometimes assimilate into their owners' families. Nevertheless, the dehumanization inherent in any form of slavery left enduring scars, especially on women, who were not only laborers but were often forced into roles as concubines, domestic workers, or surrogate wives, thereby becoming symbols of male wealth and dominance (Lovejoy, 2000).

Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* dramatizes this intersection of gender and slavery through the life of Ojebeta, a young girl born in the Ibuza society of Nigeria. Initially cherished by her parents and protected by traditional charms and tattoos, her life takes a tragic turn after the death of her parents. Her own brother, driven by greed, sells her to a wealthy relative, Ma Palagada. This act exemplifies how women are commodified even within their own families, with economic necessity or personal gain often outweighing familial bonds.

Within Ma Palagada's household, Ojebeta is socialized into the life of a domestic slave. Although she is not shackled in chains, her bondage is psychological, cultural, and gendered. She performs menial tasks, learns obedience, and accepts subordination as her fate. Even when opportunities for emancipation arise—such as the proposal from Clifford or the offer to move to Bonny with Victoria—they are ultimately fleeting or blocked by societal expectations and her own internalized limitations.

The death of Ma Palagada becomes a pivotal moment in Ojebeta's life. She returns to her village with a promise to repay the money Ma had paid for her—a symbolic gesture that reflects her internalized belief that her value can be quantified and her freedom purchased. However, freedom, as Emecheta reveals, is not a straightforward path. Back in her village, Ojebeta is faced with yet another attempt to control her destiny when her relatives

try to arrange a marriage without her consent. Defiantly, she chooses Jacob, a man of her own preference, who takes her to Lagos. Nevertheless, her autonomy remains compromised as Jacob not only pays her bride price but also reimburses the money paid for her by Ma Palagada. Thus, she transitions from one form of ownership to another, perpetuating the cycle of domination.

Emecheta uses Ojebeta's story to illustrate the irony and elusiveness of freedom for women in patriarchal societies. The supposed moments of independence experienced by Ojebeta are transient and often result in deeper forms of subjugation. Her identity is continuously shaped by others—first her brother, then Ma Palagada, and finally Jacob—each of whom assumes control over her personhood. The novel becomes a poignant narrative of lost identity and unfulfilled potential. As Ojebeta grows from a child into a woman, she is never afforded the space to explore her individuality or assert her own will fully.

The theme of enslavement in the novel is therefore both literal and metaphorical. While Ojebeta's physical slavery is apparent, Emecheta delves deeper into the psychological and cultural enslavement that many women endure. The character's inability to truly understand or appreciate her own self-worth underlines a broader social tragedy—one in which women's lives are circumscribed by traditions and expectations that deny them agency (Chukwuma, 1994).

*The Slave Girl* is not just a historical reflection on the slave trade but a broader critique of gender oppression in African societies. Emecheta's portrayal of Ojebeta serves as a powerful indictment of the systems—familial, cultural, and marital—that conspire to limit women's freedom. Through this narrative, Emecheta invites readers to reconsider notions of freedom, identity, and autonomy, particularly as they relate to African women. Her work continues to resonate as a vital contribution to feminist thought and postcolonial literature, shedding light on the enduring struggles for gender equality and human dignity.

#### **The Individuality Factor in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl***

From the moment of her birth, Ojebeta's individuality is shaped not by her own choices but by a network of cultural beliefs, familial expectations, and supernatural interpretations. In *The Slave Girl*, Buchi Emecheta presents Ojebeta as a child marked by spiritual and social peculiarity. Born into a society that interprets female births through a lens of misfortune and spiritual ambiguity, Ojebeta is immediately labeled an *ogbanje*—a child believed to be caught between the spiritual and physical worlds, repeatedly dying and being reborn to torment her parents (Emecheta, 1996, p. 10). Her father's anxiety, "They had lost so many children at birth, so many that he could not remember the number" (SG, p. 10), underscores a deep-rooted fear of infant mortality exacerbated by cultural mysticism.

The societal burden of this belief is most harshly illustrated in the community's reaction to her birth. The neighbor's remark to Umeadi—"You have a daughter, and you know daughters don't stay with you" (SG, p. 10)—not only reflects the patriarchal devaluation of female children but also sets the tone for Ojebeta's lifelong struggle with

identity and survival. From the outset, her individuality is not a privilege but a contested space, defined by her supposed spiritual “otherness.”

In traditional Igbo cosmology, *ogbanje* children are believed to form spiritual covenants with the underworld, returning repeatedly through birth only to die and cause grief (Achebe, 1958; Emecheta, 1996). The dibia’s prescription of charms—consisting of cowries, tin tops, and bells (SG, p. 10)—represents both a ritualistic attempt to anchor the child in the living world and a symbolic binding of Ojebeta’s identity to spiritual beliefs beyond her control. These charms and the facial tattoos she receives become external markers of an individuality that is not self-defined but imposed through communal and familial anxieties. Despite these external markers, Ojebeta is never fully accepted by her peers. Her facial tattoos and charms, intended to protect her and affirm her place in the world, instead become sources of alienation and ridicule. Women in the Eke market mock her appearance, seeing her as strange and different. This mockery reveals a paradox within the society’s treatment of individuality: while uniqueness is nominally honored through spiritual interpretation, it is socially ostracized when it deviates from normative aesthetics or behavior. Her designation as “special” does not empower her; rather, it isolates her within a culture that values conformity, especially in women (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

Her parents’ attempts to assert control over her spiritual destiny—through charms, journeys, and tattoos—are ultimately futile in shielding her from societal forces. Following the death of her parents in the 1918 influenza pandemic, Ojebeta’s individuality becomes even more precarious. Her brother’s decision to sell her into slavery violates traditional Igbo values, which prohibit the enslavement of one’s kin (Lovejoy, 2000). This betrayal severs her last familial tie and throws her into a new phase of life where her identity is further eroded under the control of slave owners who regard her merely as property.

In her new environment, Ojebeta’s previously nurtured individuality dissolves. Once a child allowed to express herself freely—“to shout when she felt like doing so”—she becomes subdued and cautious, modelling her behaviour after the other enslaved girls who had long abandoned any semblance of personal expression (SG, p. 87). Her once vibrant sense of self is silenced, mirroring Fanon’s (1967) argument that colonial and subjugated spaces suppress individuality in favor of survivalist conformity.

The symbolic loss of her charms upon arriving at Ma Palagada’s household is especially poignant. These objects, infused with personal and cultural significance, are confiscated, representing a ritualistic stripping of identity. The loss is not merely material but psychological and spiritual; it reflects what Erving Goffman (1961) describes as a “mortification of the self,” a forced re-socialization into a dehumanizing system. Still, Ojebeta clings to these charms, hiding them as secret totems of a past self she refuses to entirely relinquish. They remain, albeit hidden, as the final vestiges of a self she once knew. Later in the narrative, Ojebeta becomes entangled in the patriarchal structures that dominate her society. Her relatives, Uteh and Eze, negotiate her marriage without consulting her,

illustrating how Igbo marital customs often silenced women's voices (Spencer-Walter, 1990). The ritual of cutting a woman's hair as a sign of marital ownership, as seen when Eze attempts to manipulate tradition for personal gain, reinforces the commodification of women within this social framework. Yet, in an act of resistance, Ojebeta chooses to take her fate into her own hands. She cuts off her own hair and burns it—an act that symbolically reclaims the autonomy tradition had denied her.

However, this act of defiance is not unproblematic. Though she chooses to marry Jacob, a man she loves, her freedom is compromised by the institution of marriage itself. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) astutely observes that “women lose status by being married” (p. 75). In entering this union, Ojebeta transitions from literal slavery to marital enslavement. Her declaration—“Thank you my new owner. Now I am free in your house” (SG, p. 184)—is bitterly ironic. Freedom here is defined not by independence but by a change in ownership. The phrase encapsulates the paradox of her situation: though she believes she has chosen her path, her individuality is still subsumed under patriarchal control.

In the end, Ojebeta's story exemplifies the tragic trajectory of a woman repeatedly denied self-definition. From spiritual possession to familial control, enslavement, and finally marriage, her journey illustrates how female individuality is continually negotiated, suppressed, or erased within overlapping systems of tradition, patriarchy, and colonial influence. As Emecheta critiques through Ojebeta's life, even love and personal choice may not be sufficient to reclaim individuality in a society structured to deny it.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the multiple layers of difficulties and systemic hurdles faced by women in the patriarchal society of Ibuza, as depicted in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*. Through the lens of Ojebeta's life story, Emecheta unearths the intersection of gender, tradition, and slavery, exposing how even in societies where slavery has a legal or traditional basis, women often bear an even greater burden. Slavery, as a human institution, is universally dehumanizing, but in the context of women, particularly in traditional African societies, its impact becomes profoundly gendered. Women are not only commodified but also trapped in a nexus of cultural practices that strip them of their agency, identity, and autonomy.

The novel begins by illustrating how Ojebeta, though born free, is quickly subjected to a lifetime of symbolic and literal enslavement. This begins with her being labeled an *ogbanje*, a spirit-child believed to be born repeatedly only to die young—a belief system rooted in traditional Igbo cosmology (Achebe, 1958). This categorization immediately subjects her to a ritualistic form of bondage, where protective measures like facial scarification and charms are employed. While ostensibly aimed at safeguarding her life, these practices paradoxically imprison her within the constraints of culture and superstition. Her parents' efforts to protect her ultimately fail, as her own brother commodifies her by selling her into slavery—a chilling reminder of how patriarchy operates within familial structures as well.

Ojebeta's transition from a cherished daughter to a domestic slave exemplifies how young girls can be stripped of their identities and aspirations at a formative age. Her individuality is eroded through the constant subjugation by various masters who treat her not as a person but as a possession. This echoes broader postcolonial feminist critiques that highlight how African women often experience double marginalization—both from colonial legacies and indigenous patriarchal systems (Mohanty, 1988).

Even in what appears to be a liberatory turn—her movement into Jacob's household—the illusion of freedom remains just that: an illusion. While Ojebeta is no longer a domestic slave in the strictest sense, the power dynamics embedded in traditional marriage arrangements continue to constrain her. Emecheta critiques these systems by portraying how marriage in this context becomes another form of servitude for women, reinforcing the idea that liberation is not solely about physical freedom but also about mental, emotional, and social emancipation. Ojebeta's inability to "change the masters," despite her maturity, underscores the persistence of patriarchal control, even under the guise of domestic stability or affection.

The novel, therefore, serves as a powerful commentary on the loss and gradual reclamation of female identity in a society that constantly seeks to suppress it. Ojebeta's journey reflects the broader struggles of many African women who navigate between tradition and modernity, subjugation and resistance. As such, *The Slave Girl* is not merely a tale of personal hardship but a socio-political critique of gender roles, cultural traditions, and the deep scars of slavery. The narrative emphasizes that the process of attaining selfhood and maturity for women in such societies is fraught with challenges, often marked by loss, endurance, and the will to survive.

In conclusion, Emecheta's portrayal of Ojebeta encapsulates the central thesis of this paper: that female identity in patriarchal societies like Ibuza is continually under threat from socio-cultural practices, familial betrayal, and gendered power dynamics. Yet, through endurance and subtle acts of resistance, women like Ojebeta carve out spaces for agency, however limited. This narrative calls for a critical re-examination of how tradition and gender intersect in perpetuating systems of oppression, reminding readers that the path to true freedom for women is still an ongoing struggle.

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