

Slavery and Moral Progress in Buchi Emecheta's Novel *The Slave Girl*

Ambreen Altaf

Research Scholar
School of Studies in English
Vikram University Ujjain M.P

Abstract

Slavery a huge blot on humanity and a form of dependent labor deprives one of his/her personal liberty and the right to move about geographically. Slavery is a prototype of a relationship defined by domination and power. Slavery has been a popular theme of post-colonial literature and this paper is a literary analysis of theme of slavery in Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Slave Girl*. The study examines positive aspects of slavery in case if master is good hearted. It also shows how education helps these slaves to lead a successful life after freedom is attained.

Key words: *The Slave Girl*, Slavery, Slave trade, Education

During early 16th century, the settlement of Europeans in America resulted in terrific changes throughout the Globe especially in colonial areas and worst affected among them were African colonies. Initially the colonial settlements were supposed to trade or supply certain goods like ivory, gold, pepper, dyewood and indigo, there was no idea of human trafficking or we can say of slave trade, but it was only when in 1640s Dutch merchants introduced technology of planting sugarcane to Barbados. When plantations began to rise and almost all colonizers indulged in plantations,

demand of labor was felt and this demand led to origin of slave trade. Initially it were only Dutch merchants who were involved in slave trade, but when demand for slaves kept on increasing and Dutch could not fulfill them, it was then that English entered into this inhumane trade. Soon large gangs of African slaves were transported or bought and sold from one party to another and many laws were passed to restrict the rights of these slaves. Every sort of right like right to freedom, right to speech, right to education etc were banned for slaves, instead laws were constructed in such a way that these slaves were even deprived from the right of being human, they were indeed treated as property by their owners and any sort of treatment they desired was allowed. The slave trade flourished everywhere with no fear of being caught because law declared slave trade as legal. In the beginning slave trade in British was carried out from many ports but under the slave Act of 1799 the slave trade was restricted to London, Bristol and Liverpool. The demand of African slaves was more because they proved to be adaptable to harsh conditions which others were not capable of and it was here that role of African companies changed and they too started supplying slaves under high prices which in turn resulted in interlopers (illegal traders). According to historian James L. Stokesbury,

The first Negro slaves were actually imported on humanitarian reasons. Bishop Las Casas in the West Indies realized that the Indians made poor slaves and soon died off, so he recommended they be replaced by Negroes, who seemed more adaptable. His suggestion was taken up with such alacrity that he was soon appalled by it. ... Within the first generation of settlement of the New World, the slave trade was a going thing, and there was no stopping it.

Depriving these slaves from their rights and treating them enough harshly resulted in several campaigns in British to abolish slavery during 1760s and these campaigns were not only supported by black abolitionists but by some whites also. These pro-slavery campaigns created a lot of stress on British economy and enslaved rebellions put forth certain demands including no further enslaved Africans to be transported and slave owners must treat their existing slaves better. Even after campaigns no improvement in treatment of slaves was felt and as a result rebellions continued again and it was ultimately in 1807 that Parliament passed an Act for abolition of slave trade between Africa, West Indies and America. In 1833 Parliament passed a further strong act to abolish slavery and finally slavery and slave trade were declared illegal.

When we talk of literature of blacks it was passed orally from generation to generation but it was after colonization that literature shifted from oral tradition to written and came forward not only in native language but in Global language as well i.e English. Whatever blacks had faced at the hands of colonizers became subject matter of Black literature in various genres. Themes like freedom, slavery, equality, racism and so on were given expression. Since, slave trade was prominent in African colonies and its effects were harsh so, it also became a prominent theme in African literature like in works of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Wole Soyinka etc.

Florence Onyebuchi Emecheta was a Nigerian born British novelist who also dealt with this prominent theme of slavery in her novel *The Slave Girl*. But the treatment of theme of child slavery by Buchi Emecheta is somewhat different she not

only shows its negative impact but also enlightens its positive side and shows how lives of slaves can change to positivity also.

Ogbanjee Ojebeta, the only surviving daughter of Okwueku and Umeadi and the protagonist of novel is the most beloved child. She is loved so much that her father faces death in the fearful kingdom of Idu to get safety charms for her. Since the trade of slavery was declared illegal by then but still in dark nights at certain places slave trade was carried behind curtains. Umeadi aware of this summoned for the expensive tattoo artist to draw tattoos on Ojebet's face which are symbol that she can never be a slave. But fate has something else in store for her and a severe influenza spreads in Idu which engulfs first her giant like but hardworking and loving father and then her mother. To escape this epidemic her eldest brother Owezim leaves Idu in search of Whiteman's job and another good for nothing brother Okolie a horn blower has no interest in farming and is lazy enough to feed even his own self. Okolie we can say a bit selfish plans to take his sister who is only 5 years old to his relative Ma Palagada who is very rich to fetch some money for his coming dance competition and seeds of yam. To avoid any sort of encounter with any of the relatives who are ready to keep Ojebeta for the sake of bride price, Okolie leaves during midnight and Ojebeta follows him without any doubt as she has never learned to distrust anyone and here it is her real blood brother from same parents. After walking a lot through dense forests and then taking a canoe they finally reach the market place in Otu Onitsha. Ojebeta unaware of her brother's plan trusts him blindly and Okolie in dilemma whether to sell her sister to Ma Palagada or not reach the stall of Ma Palagada. Okolie still in deep thoughts looks at the slave girls working in stall and notices their clean and good clothes, ultimately decides to proceed with his plan for at

least his sister won't die of starvation. Ma Palagada arrives and provides Ojebeta with food and herself proceeds to finalize the deal with Okolie. Ojebeta still unaware of everything, waiting for her brother but when patience for waiting gets enough she runs away from stall in search of her brother but attempt fails and she gets caught by Chiago another slave girl and it is here that truth comes to her like a thunderbolt and a new title of slave is given and here is the moment when we enter into the household of the owner and his/her slaves.

Whenever the word slave is used for someone, everybody gets goose bumps and we start pitying him, but the way Emecheta has presented slavery in her novel, it at least lessens the threat. The first unfortunate thing that befalls a slave is that he loses his real identity and has to forget that he is born from a mother and has several blood relations like we see in case of Ojebeta the only proof of her identity are her safety charms but Ma Palagada orders them to be cut down and thus depriving her of her real identity. Another backdrop is that a slave no more owns his/her body and soul and both are under the control of owner. A slave loses every sort of freedom and has no right of making choice for his ownself. Freedom is snatched to such an extent that one doesn't have a choice to fall ill as we see it is Pa Palagada who treats all types of illness with Epsom salt which tastes very bad so that slaves don't make excuses to do rest. Since slaves were owned by their masters so, they could do anything they wished to and nobody could dare to raise a voice. Chaigo a slave girl of 18 years old is time and again molested by Pa Palagada against her wish and he also impregnates her when Ma Palagada gets hospitalized due to severe illness. Even Ojebeta is also not asked whether she wants to marry Clifford or not it is just that Clifford falls for her and Ma agrees to it and the decision is announced to her.

The severe punishment for meager mistakes was another menace. Pa Palagada was very strict and every time he went to market, he would get a cane with him which was used to punish slaves for any sort of mistake whether big or small.

Presentation of slavery by Emecheta has in it a positive side as well. For living a comfortable life one needs food, shelter, clothes to survive. All these facilities at the house of Ma Palagada are provided in abundance to these slaves and this was also one of the reasons why Okolie sold his sister to Ma, he didn't want his sister to die of starvation. These facilities are provided in a proper manner as we notice when Ojebeta after the death of Ma goes to her native village Asaba she observes that clothes she wears on regular basis are far better than these women wear on market day. Despite all these facilities instinct of freedom values more than all this as Amanna says to Ojebeta "Go to your people, and eat the mushroom of freedom if they cannot afford to buy you meat"(Emecheta 146).

In African society people believed in lots of superstitions and terrible one was that twins bring bad luck and they were thrown away in deep forest to die and it is here that slave trade comes to rescue of loving mothers as we see in Amanna she too is one of the twins her mother kept in secret to protect her but when it became difficult for her to protect her further she sells her as a slave to give her a chance to live. Slaves were sold because of poverty i.e in the household of slaves basic amenities could not be satisfied and in such circumstances the idea of receiving education is far from becoming reality and here again owner of slaves Ma comes to rescue as Ma arranges education for her slaves in the Sunday school of Christians no doubt with the intention to make her image better in society but whatever the motive fact is that slaves get

education and are able to inculcate in them fine and polished manners like they learn to respond as yes Ma am and yes Sa instead of Eh whenever some elder calls to them. Slaves under the guardianship of their owners are trained for various skills like sewing, sweeping, cooking and handling several businesses. This training is a life time achievement and slaves after earning freedom can live a comfortable and independent life with the help of these skills as these skills turn to earning hand like we see Amanna after achieving freedom becomes a successful businesswoman who owns shop and a car and Jienuaka also a slave too becomes a businessman in Out. “Jienuaka was now a successful businessman in Otu and had married Nwayinuzo; her friend Amanna had also gone into business and had a big shop, and a car” (Emecheta 177). Even Ma also agrees to Clifford of his marrying to Ojebeta because she knows various skills and has experience to be a helping hand to Clifford in his business.

Ultimately going through this masterpiece of Buchi Emecheta it becomes evident that slavery though very inhumane act has in it a hidden humanity also, provided slave master relation is humble. If she presents slavery as bad she defends it to some extent also and make us perceive it not only through negative aspect but through positive as well.

Bibliography

Emecheta, Buchi. *The Slave Girl*, New York, George Braziller, 1997. Print.

Johnson, Barbara. *Persons and Things*, Harvard College, USA, 2008. Print.

Jones, Maldwyn A. *The Limits of Liberty: American History, 1607-1992* (Short Oxford

History of the Modern World), Oxford New York: Oxford university press, 1995.

Print.

Levine, W Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk*

Thought from Slavery to Freedom, Oxford: Oxford university press, 1979.

Rice, C Duncan, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery*, London, 1975. Print.