

Closing the Circle: Silence, Subservience and Perennial Slavery in the Slave Girl

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Abstract

The Slave Girl, the fourth novel of Emecheta traces the imagined biographical life of Alice alias Ojebeta, the mother of the author who wades her ways across slavery. In one of her interviews she had said that, it was her mother who always wanted her to be a writer when she had jocularly mentioned her aspirations to pen down something creative when growing up. When the aforesaid dream became a reality, she decided to write the life of her mother setting the novel across the annals of history. All through the memory lane, the word biography will always remind one of the best biography ever written by James Boswell, on Dr. Johnson. He was a very close associate of the author and had taken every opportunity to look, observe, analyze and synthesize the life of Dr. Johnson to a book. One of the problems of writing a biography is that, the author and the one on whom the biography is made does not definitely live in the same age group. The credibility and authority of the information recorded might not be claimed close to reality. The other drawback one finds in the work is that, not all incidents of the life of the person concerned could be mentioned because a biography is a selective piece of fictional account of life's events. When the biography is itself has a maze of tangled feelings, the imagined biography is something that one has to look for in terms of the fictional record of events. Although the novelist calls the work, a historical novel, a lot of information taken to present the life of Alice cannot be considered to be essentially factual.

KEYWORDS: History; Slavery; Exploitation; Biography

ANALYSIS:

Emecheta became a writer by chance and not by choice. She did have the intense emotions to write her mind but when she was financially struck and emotionally drained, she decided that the only way to bring her up the children as a single mother is by writing. Her husband, Sylwester Onwadi was still a student of Commerce at a University in London. They were married at a very early age and the author had to relocate to London when she was barely seventeen. Problems began to crop up between the couple when they had no answers to take care of themselves and their children with the meager income her husband had got. Emecheta therefore took writing as a vocation to stand on her feet and at the same time write her mind on the patriarchal set up which forced a woman, even in the modern times to stick on to the traditional gender roles. She is the kind of a writer who always insisted that she is a feminist with a small f. This means, that she does not want to call herself a hardcore feminist but at the same time does not wish to do away with the said label. Betty B Levitov in the article, Social Theory and Literary Resources in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta observes on the contents and connections with her plots carry.

Emecheta acknowledges two spheres of influence on her development as a writer: her research in social theory and the British Nigerian literary traditions. The thinking of three sociologists Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber and the British tradition in the novel, characterized by Charles Dickens and Nigerian novelists, Flora Nwapa and Chinua Achebe. She deals symbolically with the social forces that shape and also obstruct the lives of the individuals. (2)

Womanism, a word coined by Alice Walker in her short story, *Coming Apart* which was written in the year 1979. The term deals with the experiences of women in the third world country where they are double marginalized. To give an example, a Dalit woman in India is segregated on a dual front, the first she belongs to an inferior caste and the other she is a woman. The same can be seen in the case of an African woman where she is ostracized for being a woman and worst still for being a black woman. This double bind, forms the crux of all the novels of Emecheta and this is an example of what walker meant by the term womanism. The opportunities which a woman has to get are thwarted because she is double marginalized. In a broader term, this is an extended form of feminism where the problems of woman are structured by gender, color, class, caste, religion and many other invisible factors. Emecheta feels that she is someone who writes not only about her own life experiences but rather about the whole of Africa because a typical reader cannot understand the problems of a woman without understanding the texts of them. *The Slave Girl* comes to project two main ideas, the first is the conditioned and coerced slavery which men as well as women were subjected to when they were transported across the Atlantic to work at the plantations and the other is the bonded labor practice at home where a woman has to abide by the dictates of a man because she is born a woman. Natalie Haynes in her introduction to *The Second Sex* comes up with the idea of struggle extrapolated by Beauvoir to bring together the suppressed thoughts of all the silenced women. She says,

In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir was forty one years old. One word encapsulates her existence up to that point and for a long time afterwards; freedom. In her autobiographical opus in which, starting in the 1960s, she resuscitated the past with rare openness, the notion was felt, as of adolescence, as a profound and an irrepressible drive. Exist for oneself and break with existing patterns. (4)

The success of Emecheta as a writer is brought out in two different levels. The first is by the way she presents the repressed emotions of an African woman by being plagued by the silenced emotions she experienced herself and the other is to question the long forgotten gender roles adhering despite the advent of modernism and modern thoughts. On a very cultural front, she can be seen making her readers understand the patriarchal codes of conduct which are stringently adhered to in a country like Nigeria. When the novel opens, a lot of ideas are put together to make the plot more intense and complex. The prime idea in the novel is the inclusion of a couple of markets which stand tall as a symbol of trade and objectification. Just as goods and commodities are sold and exchanged, so is a woman. She is seen as a slave, an object of desire and as someone who has to silence and suppress all the thoughts which come into her necessarily because she is a slave. Ojebeta the central character of the novel is born an ogbajee child, which is a child which is born time and again to the same parents as a reminder of the anger of gods

and ancestors which they had carried. Although her father, Okwuekwu had many choices to be polygamous, he chose not to because he wanted to live with his family in a more prosperous manner. As a couple, they suffered a lot of miscarriages and frequent abortions. The intensity of child death was so fervent that they had forgotten as to how many children had died before birth. It was a cultural practice for the Igbo to mutilate twins in case they died immediately after birth so that the tenacity of the ogbanjee child birth is curtailed. This was a ritual which required to be done so that a child would survive after birth and not get back to the world of spirits. Ojebeta survived the test of time and she was born hale and hearty. The traditional Igbo believed that in case a girl survived between the age of three and seven, it would continue to live and fortunately, she did survive. A lot of tragedies began to befall after the birth of Ojebeta and the first of them is the epidemic called Felenza, which had struck the town of Ibuza. It was a kind of mysterious disease which killed people instantly. The first signs of death was of a man who was in his early thirties and he died of the epidemic leaving his children who were too young to understand the fact that their father had passed away. Not very late, Okwuekwu was brought home, he was rather carried home as he was infected by Felenza. He died sooner than Ojebeta could understand the pain of her father's loss. It was customary for the Igbo to have a seven month mourning where women are not allowed to come out of the house and must not have any contact with the outside world. Her mother had been keen on observing the dictums as a widowed mother. After a lapse of time, before the second burial was on, one morning her mother had died and Ojebeta was trying to suck her empty nipples in search of milk. The entire village had gone cold and there was nothing which could be done. Alice was born when her parents had died when she could hardly know the meaning of what life would be when the parents are dead and gone. One finds that the novel has a lot of impetus given to death and loss. Had the parents of Ojebeta been alive, she would have not been sold by her own brother for being a slave. The novel does have a mention of the coming of age of Alice but still it has much more to offer than merely seeing it as the decadence of a character who had none to take care or fend for her needs. On the whole, the novel looks at the ways by which women have neither a sense of identity or voice to express their anguish. All through the novel one finds that Alice does not rise up to fight the existing norms of the society which are controlled and conditioned by patriarchy. The novel begins with the idea of a slave and ends with the same idea calling it a pavilion. She was sold a slave at the beginning by her brother for a paltry sum and when she was married by Jacob, he too got her as a domestic slave who would exist to adhere to all his dictates.

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