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## **Maternal Oppression of the Girl-Child in Selected Novels by Buchi Emecheta** *(Pp. 462-470)*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the roles that women, especially mothers, play in the pains that their daughters suffer in the home. Knowingly or otherwise, mothers often, cause their female children untold suffering during their growing up years. Consequently, the degree of suffering of the girl-child at the hands of her mother or mother figure is often, directly responsible for the kind of up-bringing that she metes out to her own girl-child or female children under her care. It is therefore towards the exposition of this otherwise hidden reality about the up bringing of the female child that this paper is committed.*

### **Introduction**

Feminist activities have been on the increase in the last decades, this has been due mainly, to an upsurge of feminist movements with analytically divergent ideologies and feminist perspectives. These varied ideologies have often, been attributed largely, to the specificity of place and time, which compels women to prefer one brand to another. In the mist of varied definitions of the term feminism by different people, the definition offered by Joni Lovenduski and Vicky Randall (1993) which states that any ideology, activity and policy

“whose goal is to remove discrimination against women and to break down the male domination of society” seems more appropriate for the purpose of this paper. Existing feminist theories such as the Marxist, radical, liberal, socialist, conservative and Amazon all propound ideologies that address the status of the female within patriarchal society. However, the theory that best suits the argument being pursued in this paper will be tripartite in nature: first, the Amazon feminist theory, which denies that women are passive; next the masculinist theory of Chinweizu, which argues that women are the most powerful of the two sexes and last, the matriachist theory of Ogundipe-Leslie, Acolonu and Ifi Amadiume, which emphasizes that women’s roles are not determined by their sex. A combination of all three theories will enhance the intra-gender perspective that this paper hopes to highlight in Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *The Bride Price*.

### **Oppression**

The term oppression has been defined differently but for the purpose of this paper, the definition offered by Nkereuwem (1997) which states that “any burdensome exercise of power or authority over somebody with continual injustice and cruelty that makes the person being oppressed feel worried, uncomfortable or unhappy” expresses the realistic working mechanism of the word oppression (P.3).

Emecheta’s major preoccupation is women, within given socio-cultural and economic settings. She also examines how such settings touch on the lives of women to the extent that they begin to inflict pain upon one another. She is particularly conscious of the fact that women pose the greatest obstacles to the lives of their fellow women when in an interview with Adeola James, (1990) she states that “half of the problem rests with women, they are busy bitching about one... another” such that when changes are suggested, “our women don’t like it”(P. 36). Also, because Buchi and her mother never got to understand each other to share that love that should flow between mother and daughter; she believed that her mother died never loving her; “words said that she died not blessing me” (*Head Above... P3*).

Bearing in mind this fact that Emecheta is very conscious of the relations between women, it is not surprising therefore, that she preoccupies herself with themes that effectively portray the vicious nature of women towards one another.

### **Literature Review:**

Emecheta's works have similarly received critical reviews and, as Helen Chukwuma (1989) asserts in "positivism and the female crisis: The novels of Buchi Emecheta" have "filled the gaping gender gap between male and female characterization and shown the other side of the coin". In her careful analysis, Chukwuma traces "Emecheta's femininity as seen in her portrayal of female characters from the slave girl prototype to the mother and single fulfilled woman" (P.2).

Furthermore, Chukwuma believes that Emecheta's *The Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl* "depict the young adolescent female asserting herself". And of *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Joys of Motherhood* she contends that a woman can only escape the "tyranny of a tradition and a system by asserting her individuality, while still playing out the roles of daughter, wife and mother" (Chukwuma 1989: P.6-7).

In another review "The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the novels of Buchi Emecheta", Katherine Frank observes that Emecheta's growth as a novelist, starting from her autobiographical novels to "the lyricism of *The Joy of Motherhood*", has been to present her own vision of African womanhood under oppressive African traditions. This paper looks beyond the woman's traditional roles to the way that they are affected by the roles they themselves play.

In addition, Cynthia Ward, in "What they Told Buchi Emecheta. Oral Subjectivity and The Joys of 'Otherhood' " observes that Emecheta, rather than be accused by critics like Ogunyemi and Umeh of ambivalence and "misguided European feminism" should, in fact, be commended for not only speaking for herself as an African woman, but for all African womanhood. In this review, Ward tries to foster an identity amongst Emecheta's women characters in particular and African women in general. This parity drawn by Ward forms a useful basis for the hypothetical statements that this paper hopes to highlight with respect to the cyclical behaviors of women.

In yet another critical opinion on Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Femi Ojo-Ade identifies Adah, the heroine of the novel, as an oppressor and victimizer who cheats her husband, Francis, by exploiting her marital status to her personal advantage. This paper has explored the fact that women have the capacity to exploit men as well as their fellow women.

Also, Osayimwense Osa in “The Bride price: A masterpiece of African Youth literature,” traces Aku-nna’s development from late childhood to early adolescence by highlighting the different growth stages and experiences that she passes through. Osa rightly observes that “her development is plagued early by two traumatic experiences- the death of her father, and her subsequent relocation from cosmopolitan Lagos into a conservative, traditional “... Aku-nna’s plight in Okonkwo’s home, the antagonisms of Okonkwo’s wives...” (1995, PP. 28-29). The antagonism of Okonkwo’s wives will be shown as being oppressive to Aku-nna rather than just rivalry as seen by Osa and of significance will be her own mother’s betrayal of all her trusts by siding with Okonkwo’s house hold against Aku-nna. On the preference of the male child over the female, Osa recognizes the fact that both Adah, the heroine of *Second-Class Citizen* like Aku-nna of *The Bride Price*, suffer a “psychological feeling of inadequacy at home because she is a girl” (P.33). Rather than be seen as self-imposed psychological torture, the activities of other women have been examined as the root causes of such mental pains.

In addition, Gloria C. Chukurere in “Buchi Emecheta: The yoke of womanhood” where she states that the author’s “belief that the failure or success of a character depends not only upon extraneous factors but also upon the character’s individual strength of will” (1995, P.206). This is because whereas the extraneous factors stand on Aku-nna’s path, it is actually her broken will, which destroys her: “her revolt against entrenched notions of female subjugation through limiting social norms has not been wholly successful” (Ibid).

In yet another work, “Buchi Emecheta” Catherine Obianuju Acholonu traces the history of the bondage of the female in Emecheta’s works beginning with *The Slave Girl* to *The Bride Price* and she concludes that the author points to the fact “that at every point in a woman’s life she is always somebody’s property” (P.218). This paper will expose the fact that the inferior positions of women, can be linked to the activities of other women who continue to accept the inferior positions through their oppressive activities.

### **The Theme of Maternal Oppression of The Girl-Child**

A very important area where women constantly oppress their own kind is in the relations between mothers and their daughters. Maternal oppression of the female begins in the home. This observation has amply been made by

feminists like Nwapa who states that “the oppression of the woman starts in the home” (James 1990, 113) and by Paulina Palmer who sees the role of the woman, especially the mother, as that of a tool of patriarchy (Palmer 1989, 102). One of the recurrent themes that expose mothers as oppressors of their own sex is that of male preference.

Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* portrays maternal oppression of the female child in the home. That a mother deprives her girl child the same opportunities that she allows the boy child are enough oppression to the girl to cause her unhappiness, besides thwarting of her ambitions. It is because Adah’s mother does not believe in the education of females that Adah does not begin school before her brother who, in fact, is younger than she is. In other words, the unhappiness which Adah experiences as a result of not being in school is caused by her mother who would want her daughter to stay at home to help out with house work rather than leave home to be educated. Moreover, when the young Adah makes it bold and walks into a school, her fears at the end of school that day was not that her father would beat her for she claims that:

*Pa would be alright: he would probably cane her, you know just a few strokes - six or so, not much but Ma would not cane, she would smack and smack, and then nag and nag all day long.*

Adah has been able to identify her mother as being the one who oppresses her in the home and because of the bad relationship that exists between them, the girl finds herself not cooperating with her mother at all. Emecheta states that the girl “would lie, just for the joy of lying; she took secret joy in disobeying her mother” (P.9), a delinquent situation brought about by the psychological oppression that she suffers at the hands of her mother.

At the death of her father, Adah’s fortunes in life take a downward turn because she is left in the hands of her mother who has to take every decision for her. Knowing the bad experiences she has had with her mother, Adah knows that it was the end of the road for her educationally. Her mother, not being ready to source money from any form of business to send Adah to school decides that a husband has to be found to pay a good bride price on her head. Nevertheless, to Adah’s surprise all the suitors that come for her hand were old men who were bald headed: “...because only they could afford the high bride - price’ Ma was asking” (P.20). To Adah’s continuous

surprise, she discovers that her mother's asking for a big bride price is so that the money could be used to train her son, Boy, at school. Even at this, Adah feels that her mother is oppressing her by not allowing her choose her own husband amongst young people of her age.

This being the somewhat disagreeable up bringing that is meted to Adah by her own mother; it is surprising that later as an adult, she in turn, would consider preferring her sons to her daughters. On one occasion in their London abode, Adah's son, Vicky, is taken ill and while at the hospital, a nurse asks if the boy was her only child going by the way his illness has affected her and Adah's reply is "... there was another, but she was only a girl" (P.68) as if to say girls were no children and if they were ill, they could die just like that. This attitude keeps one in constant wonder why women, especially, mothers continue to despise their own kind even when they themselves have been victims of such.

The reason may very likely be in the fact that "...maternal roles must continue to protect the smug position of the male as the head of the family" (Nkere-uwem 1997, P.68).

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, there are instances that depict women as being the oppressors of their fellow women. And, maternal oppression of the girl child, a theme very close to Emecheta's heart, has similarly been highlighted in this novel. Here again, the mother does not want her female children to continue schooling because they "...will have to leave and help me in running the house and in my trade" (P.174). This is Nnu Ego talking about her twin daughters. Having so decided, one of the girls, Taiwo, grumbling at the chore given to her and her twin sister, Kehinde, while the boys do nothing she promptly tells her mother "The boys can help too" (P.175) but Nnu Ego will not have her male children wallow in menial house chores as she replies:

*"They have to go to their lesson, Taiwo... you are a girl, you know". (P. 175).*

This made the girl so unhappy and at moments such as this, such girls curse the fact that they were born and that they were born girls into a society that wants only boys. Taiwo does not hide her disapproval of her mother's preference as she answers back in bitterness "I know that, mother. You remind us all the time" (Ibid). In other words, the girl Taiwo is fed up with being reminded that she is not a boy and as such, cannot but toil for her livelihood. Here again, it is the mother who continues to keep her own

daughter in perpetual unhappiness. Additionally, Emecheta makes a point that is very important in the relationship between Ibuza mothers and their daughters. At the point of the encounter between Taiwo and her mother, Nnu Ego, a woman neighbour of theirs, called Iyawo Itsekiri observes that Igbos can sell virtually any thing to get money, even their own children. Nnu Ego's reply does not disprove Iyawo Itsekiri's claim altogether especially as it relates to her female children for she claims that although she does not intend to sell her children, "...I wouldn't mind sending the girls somewhere ... if I would be given some money for their services" (P.175). This is a mother, ready to send her own daughters into slavery if only it will fetch her some money. The money, she contends, will be very useful to her thus: "The money I'd get from them would help me in looking after others" (P.175). These "others" no doubt, are the boys. It is obvious that mothers will continue to oppress and subject their daughters to inhuman and degrading circumstances in order that they help to maintain the position of the man within the patriarchal society unless women themselves consciously assume a drastic position to change their circumstances.

In addition, in *The Bride Price*, Emecheta concentrates on the lack of bond between mother and daughter and systematically, she makes the girl child realize the lack of bond between her and her mother thus "Aku-nna knew that there was a kind of bond between her and her father which did not exist between her and her mother" (P.12). This lack of bond between mother and daughter is the consequent result of all the oppressions that the girl child suffers at the hands of her mother in the home.

Similarly, this lack of bond between mother and daughter graduates into a situation of betrayal. Aku-nna's father having died, she, her brother and their mother move from Lagos to Ibuza where the mother is quickly inherited by their father's elder brother, Okonkwo. Okonkwo handsome and strong even in old age, easily gets Aku-nna's mother, Ma Blackie pregnant, a child that Ma Blackie has looked for, for several years after the birth of her last son. For the fact that her own personal interest has been fulfilled, Ma Blackie betrays Aku-nna who falls in love with an Osu man called Chike.

She sides with the entire household to reject Chike as an outcast even though she knows that her daughter's happiness depends on her marrying Chike. And for betraying her in this manner, Aku-nna is said to have started to hate her mother thus: "...she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all" (P.120). The girl is disappointed in the mother because

she, her brother and her mother used Chike's little presents of beverages and cans of milk and other sanitary gifts. So it surprises her that her mother could suddenly join in the condemnation of Chike to the extent that "Ma Blackie cried and cursed her fortune in being saddled with such a daughter" (P.125) to all present to hear. This outcry truly devastated Aku-nna and she doubts that one's mother could ever be one's best friend. In addition, she wonders if her mother has "encouraged her to accept Chike's friendship in order to just use him like a convenient tool, to ferry them through a difficult period of adjustment?" (P.126). This realization brought to Aku-nna great bitterness, which is said to have gone beyond tears. Maternal oppression therefore is an important aspect of a girl child's developmental life because as she grows up in the home with her mother or other women, she gets to feel her first pinch of bitterness from the activities of the mother or whoever it is that plays the role of a mother to her.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has demonstrated that women are not passive and that they possess the required inertia to oppress people of their own gender. Also, Buchi Emecheta's three novels studied have amply, portrayed the otherwise hidden facts that the girl-child gets her first brush with oppression from the home and at the hands of her mother or mother figure with whom she lives. Similarly, readers can without doubt, relate easily the subtle supportive undercurrent of the cyclical nature of such oppressions as possible to manifest in the relationship between the sufferers of such fate with their own female children or other female children put under their care. The mere fact that African women writers like Emecheta and others have reflected these poignant insights into the powers of women and indeed the origin of women's oppression makes it all the more authentic. Do these pointers therefore suggest that women need first, to organize their own affairs before looking the direction of men? A plausible area, which is way out of the scope of the present research and therefore left for the future.

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