Chapter III

PRE-COLONIAL/ COLONIAL AFRICAN WOMAN IN
THE BRIDE PRICE AND THE JOYS OF
MOTHERHOOD

Early African literature which canonizes names such as Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyika and Cyprian Ekwensi deals with the saga of the African nation in narratives which centre on a male figure. The women characters are on the whole marginalized and given subordinate roles and generally their life is portrayed as one of harmony and satisfaction following their traditional life pattern. The flip side of the story revealing the actual living conditions of the women and their African surroundings is what the reader comes across in the women writing in Africa; here we find the customs and superstitions, the rules and taboos that fetter and reduce the existence of the women in a rigidly traditional and patriarchal society.

In contrast, Emecheta’s works are far more balanced and they show a keen awareness of the social reality. Emecheta portrays the real African woman without playing down the negative treatment meted out to her by the society. But at the same time she does not black out what is commendable and positive in the society’s treatment of women.
Whereas Ma Blackie in *Bride Price* depicts the negative picture, Ona in *Joys of Motherhood* is the emblem of the positive element in the African woman’s lives. A look at the gynography of Nigerian women as given in The International Women’s Movement Anthology, *Sisterhood is Global* gives a comprehensive idea of the indeterminate position that African woman enjoyed in the society:

A woman owns and controls property brought into marriage and also the income during marriage. Generally polygamy is legal. Bride price must be paid by the groom’s family...A woman must change her birth name to her husband’s name. If a husband has more than one wife, he is obliged to treat them equally and provide separate living quarters...A father generally receives custody of the children; if he dies, his family assumes custody....Parental duties are shared jointly. Daughters are frequently denied education since they are not permanent members of his family. (Morgan 500)

Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*, is the initial work that seriously brought Emecheta into fictional narration. Published in 1976, *The Bride Price* deals with the adolescence and marriage of the African woman; her infancy and childhood form the subject of *The Slave Girl* while *The Joys of Motherhood*, as the title indicates, focuses on motherhood. The novel, *The Bride Price* dedicated to ‘My Mother, Alice Ogbanje Emecheta’, is autobiographical to an extent;
the title is from the novel written by Adah, her autobiographical alter ego in *The Second Class Citizen*. Ma Blackie, Aku-nnà’s mother, is evidently drawn as a parallel to her own mother. As the novel opens, the family relocates themselves to their roots in the Ibo village of Ibuza after a stint of life in Lagos where Akunna and her brother Nna-Ndo spent their childhood. Akunna, born towards the end of the World War II, like Buchi Emecheta invites identification with the author. The story centres on the enslavement of women to ancient beliefs and traditional dogmas despite their allegiance to Western/modernized outlook. The conclusion of the novel too is autobiographical -- “In a personal way Emecheta draws a parallel between herself and the fictional Akunna and contends that she feels convinced that like Akunna, her own marriage broke up because she did not allow her prospective husband to pay her bride price” (Emenyonu 135).

*The Bride Price*, like Emecheta’s other novels, is in its painstaking depiction of African culture and customs, similar to the novels of the male writers like Achebe, but from a female point of view. According to her, “I write about Africa from the western world and at the same time, Africa for Africans…When I write, I look for a problem in a certain society from a woman’s point of view” (Emenyonu 131). Emecheta brings to the fore a darker side of Africa exemplified in the life of the woman and the psychological and physical pressures upon the ‘weaker sex’ through cankerous customs like arranged marriages, polygamy, perpetual pregnancy and
widowhood. Her novels are different from those of the male canon in that they depict the sad plight of women in society. Though she praises some aspects of African life, on the whole Emecheta attacks the bestiality of the traditional culture that exploits, degrades and abuses the womenfolk and pushes her down to mental and psychological paralysis. For Emecheta, women constitute the most oppressed, the most underprivileged and the most unfortunate of all the disaffected groups and she has made the championing of the cause of womanhood her own peculiar territory (Osa 124).

The women of the Dark Continent are initiated to society by means of numerous ceremonial customs and traditional rituals that characterize the civilization. Buchi Emecheta in The Bride Price, chronicling the growing pangs of the young African girl, carefully delineates the gradual submergence of the central character, Akunna, into traditional society and its mores through various religious and social rituals that are part and parcel of African society. Depicted as seeking shelter in the traditional roots of Iboland from the colonial Lagos on losing their father, (the breadwinner in Western settings), Akunna with her family is received back to their land. A chorus of chants and burial rites shocks her into accepting the truths of life, such as death in the family.

The innumerable anthropological details given by Emecheta in the novel, (perhaps in imitation of male writers like Achebe) create diversions throughout the main narrative. They are saved from being
digressions, since they can also be related to the various stages of Akunna’s development as a woman and an African individual. In short *Bride Price* portrays the growing up of a young African girl and Emecheta relates it through various African rituals. The civilization and culture of traditional Ibo society are brought out in the descriptions of the customs time-hallowed -- the rituals of the burial ceremony followed by the wake up songs and dances and the loud mourning of the community for the departing spirit. This is followed by the specific rites for the widows that are minutely detailed in the chapter entitled “Death” which is a faithful image of a civilization with its myriad beliefs and taboos.

In spite of being an ardent lover of her culture and the ancient customs of the land, Emecheta depicts the unpleasant truth while speaking about women’s life in traditional Africa. Even though sociological studies show that women were relatively autonomous, *Bride Price* does not conform to this view but presents women as the voiceless section of the society that has to bend to male prerogative as exemplified in AkuNna and her mother Ma Blackie.

Certain other aspects of the traditional African culture also appear in the narrative, such as the courting games engaged in by adolescents. Emecheta names them night games to substantiate the slavish existence of women: “Their custom allowed this. Boys would come into your mothers hut and play at squeezing a girl’s breast, until it hurts… it was not frowned on” (*BP* 99). Emecheta discusses at
length the anthropological customs of the land. She introduces the age groups, each ‘created at three year intervals’ and shows them as rehearsing the fertility dances that coincide with Akunna’s graduation to womanhood. Emecheta thus demonstrates the protagonist’s deepening identification with her African mould. To quote Lloyd Brown:

> Her growth is simultaneously the development of her own personality and will and her perception of the rituals, the values, and the institutions through which her community celebrates its traditions and exercises its will. (50)

Other customs of Africa are described by Emecheta as a strategy for securing the reader’s sympathy for the women. The weird customs in the land which relegated women to being victims of fate are part of the novel:

> In Ibuza young girls must be prepared for anything to happen. Some youth who had no money to pay for a bride might sneak out of the bush to cut a curl from a girl’s head so that she would belong to him for life and never be able to return to her parents. (106)

This occurs in its worst form in Akunna’s life when she is kidnapped by Okoboshi, the cripple, in order to make her his bride. The novel gets the name ‘Bride Price’ from the custom of the land, whereby the groom’s family gives to the father of the bride a sum of
money, according to the merit of the girl. Only marriages performed as per such rites were sanctioned formally by the society. It is the defiance to such customs that forms the plot of the novel.

Polygamy, the hateful African tradition that ensures male hegemony and anarchy, is one of the things revolted against in *Bride Price*. As soon as Akunna reaches her native traditional village, she is informed by her cousin, “You still don’t know the customs of our Ibuza people? Your mother is inherited by my father, you see, just as he will inherit everything your father worked for” (63). Likewise Akunna’s bride price as a girl child was also to be inherited by him. Since he was aiming at the ‘Obi’ position, he was pinning his hopes on the lucrative bride price the educated Akunna would fetch him. The castle of cards he builds topples over suddenly when she elopes with Chike of slavish origin when Chike saves her from an abductor perpetrating the humiliating divorce of her mother with her stepfather. According to custom, “If a man no longer wanted his wife, he would expose his backside to her in public” (163). Thus her stepfather rejects his fourth wife, Ma Blackie. The woman, who in Lagos had the single possession of a good husband, had to become the co-wife of Ozubu. Ozubu was already jealous of another young wife of her husband, Okonkwo. Her complaint to Ma Blackie exposes the customs of the land:

I don’t know where that dry stick Ezebona is going to get children from….. He would not mind spending all his
money on her. But if I or my other mate complained of a headache, he would remind us that he paid twenty pounds on our heads. *(BP 45)*

Such conversational snatches that Emecheta incorporates depict the dehumanising social framework that allows male infidelity. The polygamous lifestyle in Africa is denounced by Emecheta; she speaks of the men who deflowered young girls and unabashedly insisted on their own brides being virgins; she also speaks about young girls, who were married off to men old enough to be their fathers *(99)*. Such marriages in some cases found impotent husbands closing their eyes to their wives infidelity, priding themselves on being able to provide yams to the innumerable number of wives huts.

All these traditions and customs point to a heavily patriarchal ambience, where women were only an appendage to men. As Katherine Frank says:

Such customs and mores, in fact, are actually institutionalized forms of male oppression: inheritance of widows by their brothers in law, the custom that a man could make an unwilling woman his wife by kidnapping her and cutting off a lock of her hair, the prohibition against women marrying descendants of slaves, and numerous other inhibiting manifestations of traditional culture in *The Bride Price* are all determined and enforced by men. *(Frank, *Death of the Slave Girl* 483)*
Okonkwo, the head of the family, is the epitome of African male hegemony. This is brought forth starkly when he orders Akunna (on becoming a woman) to forego any relationship with Chike, the descendant of a slave—“that friendship must die. [But] die it must”.

The way he had spoken just now was the voice of authority, that authority which was a kind of legalized power. He was telling her, not in so many words, that she would never escape. She was trapped in the intricate web of Ibo tradition. (119)

Akunna’s musings report the growing psychological hold traditional Africa was exerting on her psyche. Even the name she was given, ‘Akunna’, meaning ‘father, s wealth’ was one that enjoined on her that according to tradition, she was to bring her father wealth on her marriage in the form of bride price, “the only consolation he could count on from her” (4) as a girl child. She is told on becoming an orphan that nobody will care for her now “until you marry. Then your husband will take care of you.” (36). Thus it is a law vehemently passed on, that a woman is forever to be bound to her man and that she is to live in comfortable servitude to him. On her own the African woman was considered a nonentity. Akunna’s cousin informs her about Ibuza beliefs:

Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head: a family without a shelter, a family without parent
is in fact a nonexisting family. Such traditions do not change very much. (25)

Emecheta in this novel highlights women in pre-colonial Africa. As a sociological record *Bride Price* enumerates the various customs and beliefs of the land--many of them detrimental to the marginalized of the community.

The hero and heroine in the novel *The Bride Price* are representatives of cultural beliefs and superstitions. Akunna is the repository of her father’s hope of bride price and Chike is the emblem of the ‘untouchable’ oshu/slave category. As a woman and as a slave born, Akunna and Chike, despite being independent and resourceful beings in themselves, are trampled on by traditional customs and practices. As the title of the novel suggests, the woman is a marketable commodity, and as she switches masters from father to husband, the price fixed on her person makes the transaction a purely business deal. Akunna is allowed a few more years of schooling than her peers against the wishes of her half-brothers, so that she would bring in more money for Okonkwo. As the prelude to engagement, many suitors are allowed to play physical games with her publicly in her mother’s hut. But as an educated young woman, the stirrings of a revolt could be deciphered in her musings on indiscriminately entertaining them since there was “no way of telling which of them would win her uncle’s approval” (122). Thus the woman of Africa
finds herself a commodity to be handed away at an auction to the highest bidder.

Therefore the status of the African woman is no better than that of a slave and this attitude is echoed even in Akunna’s words of love and gratitude to Chike: “I shall serve you till I die. I shall be a good wife to you” (156). It is such a conforming African consciousness of Akunna that drives her to her death – a punishment for choosing a man of her own choice, whose bride price was not accepted by her father. Her tale was a lesson to reinforce patriarchy in the land:

If a girl wished to live long and see her children’s children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold that existed for a very long time. (177)

Emecheta concludes the tale ironically with this Ibuza verdict. Irony is a weapon the author wields in all her novels to bring home her point to the readers. In Bride Price she flays at stagnating superstitions that debilitate the growth of the psyche of the people. Women being at the receiving end in patriarchal structures is pitied by the reader. In Bride Price, the slaves too are a subaltern group--a minority who can claim few privileges to themselves, represented by Chike. The irrational discrimination whereby Africans demean a sect
of their own community by naming them slaves or ‘osu’ is castigated by Emecheta.

The attitude of the free born natives of Ibuza to a relationship with a slave born is presented throughout the novel, right from the initial warning given by her friend Ogugua to Akunna to the heart-rending wails of her mother, who, in spite of her liking for Chike, bewails her lot in being saddled with such a daughter. “Had they ever seen a girl like this daughter of hers who was wanted by so many good families, but who preferred to choose a common…” (125). It was considered the greatest insult that could befall a family of good ancestry to be despoiled of it with the blood of slave origin. Emecheta points out the folly of such demarcation, drawing out the past history and present status of the Ofulues -- the supposed slave descendants. Chike’s great grandmother was a princess who turned into a slave when she was captured in war. Now generations later, the family of Ofulues was one of the most influential and wealthy in the tribe. With Westernization and education imparted to them, the once slave category had risen in the social ladder to acquire posts such as those of lawyers and teachers of which Chike was one. Yet the unreasonable and inflexible attitude of the traditional concepts is evident in senior Ofulue’s words:

Although he was a member of the Native Administration, the people had never allowed him to become a chief…His children taught in their schools, his children treated their
old people free in the hospitals. Yet they were still slaves, *oshu.* (86)

Like all postcolonial literature, Emecheta’s *Bride Price* too is a document on the influence of colonization upon the land. Western principles and mores slowly seep into the land – some of them good for the country but some detrimental to the future of the people. Thus the collision of cultures could be said to bring about an amalgamation of the two civilizations- East and the West.

Chike is the offspring of Westernized Africa and the seeping in of European outlook and mode of living into Africa Iboland. The impact of colonial invasion of the land and the adaptation of native culture to it are vividly delineated in the initial chapters of the novel. Akuna’s father is presented as the sorry remains of Nigerian collaboration with the imperial power in fighting Hitler. The British who could not bear the swamp in Burma made the West African soldiers stand in for them. Many of them died from the miserable conditions they were subjected to and her father barely escaped with a very badly affected leg, which despite the injections of the railway doctor and the incantations of the tribal dibia, drove him on to death.

This mixing up of both traditional and western modes of living is again seen in the dreams Akunna has of her future marriage:

She would have her marriage first of all solemnized by the beautiful goddess of Ibuza, then the Christian would
sing her a wedding march- ‘Here comes the bride’- then her father Nna would call up the spirits of his great, great grandparents to guide her, then... she would leave her father’s house. (4)

Similarly the burial of her father was “like all ceremonies in colonial Africa, a mixture of the traditional and the European. ...He was buried in the same way that he had lived: in a conflict of the two cultures” (26). The ambivalence and dislocation of the people caught between two worlds come forth in the argument on whether he should be given a Christian or pagan burial. Since he was a mixture of both in his life, they seek the final word of his only son. The innocent young boy’s preference for Christian heavens for his father was greeted with approval especially by women:

They preferred Nna to go to heaven, because heaven sounded purer, cleaner and to cap it, the heaven of the Christians was new and foreign, anything imported was considered to be much better than their old ways. (40)

The influence of European discourses perpetuated among the African masses is the surest pointer to the commingling of cultures. Other changes also are presented as having taken place, such as the government jobs offered by the Western Administration. Nna himself worked in the Nigerian Railway Department, another neighbor is a clerk at the treasury, the hero Chike is a teacher at the local school. The new order of professions listed by Ofülue--doctor, engineer or lawyer,
is the yardstick of the effect of colonization and the changing face of African society. Likewise, the Native Administration formulated by the West appointed senior Ofulue as a member cast to the winds the traditional ignominy of slave ancestry on his name. The same negligence to native superstitions shown by the Western powers made the people wary of slighting Chike’s family: “This was the age of the white man’s law. The white man had come to stay, and this culture seemed to be gaining ground; so if you did not want trouble for yourself and family, you abided by the laws of the white man” (89).

The villain of the piece, Okoboshi, could not tolerate the freedom taken by Chike in securing the friendship of Akunna. The vituperative comment by him is another record of the change due to colonial culture:

Imagine the son of a free man not being able to sit where he wants, just because the Europeans have come to pollute our land. In the olden days, you would have been used to bury the son that girl would give me when I marry her. (124)

The romance between Chike, the teacher- a product of Western education and Akunna his pupil, is related by Emecheta as one evoking European attitudes. Chike’s compassion for the ‘frailty, that was his woman’; his fantasy of a life consisting only of themselves, and his lovemaking in Western fashion show an African deviating
from the time honored and ancient mores of the land to a more flexible and Westernized outlook.

So AkuNna’s acceptance of Chike can be seen as the African woman’s rebellion against the fettering patriarchal principles and as adherence to a more liberalized European attitude. Chike, the slave descendant is able to draw the African woman upwards from her own slavery to pre-colonial laws and taboos by raising her to the level of a teacher by helping her complete her secondary schooling. This shows education is a liberating influence in her life as evidenced in most of Emecheta’s novels on women and it is extended to her by Chike.

Emecheta depicts Chike and his wife as champions of a new social order-one in which woman is no longer considered a chattel but a human being entitled to her own personal freedom. The rebellion of AkuNna finds an echo in naming their daughter as ‘Joy’ an English name. The name heralds a new order for African womanhood. Though AkuNna is a victim of the conflict between cultures, the daughter becomes the pioneer in women’s liberation in Nigeria.

Even as an oshu or outcast Chike and his clan rose to more important positions in public life than the free born during colonial administration. The inner sanctums of Africa, like the Ibuza village, were slower to open up to such unconventional education than the free born Africans transplanted to urban areas. Education is cited in most African literature of the period as the one factor which enlightened people and especially their women on their need to fight
for their individuality. This is reiterated by Emecheta in her other novels *Destination Biafra* and *Double Yoke*. Often the degree to which defiance is sustained seems to be directly proportionate to the extent and quality of the education the protagonist receives. More significantly, these females each appears to possess in varying degrees a vitality, a quality of resilience that functions indubitably as ‘helper’ (Driesen 4).

Progress was at a higher keel in urban Lagos where Nna’s family initially lived than in the villages. The introduction of education in African tribal villages and the unforeseen changes it brought about in the social system are given in *The Bride Price*, through the eyes of the illiterate Okonkwo family:

Ma Blackie automatically belonged to the elite, for her children attended school, and this was a bone of contention between Okonkwo and his other wives and children…. His father (Nna-Ndo’s) had left over one hundred pounds in savings and had joined a progressive Ibuza group called the Pioneers Association, whose aim was to assure that on the death of any member, the first son of that family would be educated to grammar school level… Okonkwo marveled a great deal at this-- fancy his younger brother having enough foresight to provide so far ahead for his son! It was a lesson to be learned… In olden days, slaves used to be sent [to school] simply to
appease the disapproval of the white missionaries; but later events were to show that it was these same educated slaves who ended up commanding key positions. (74)

Okonkwo resigns himself to the conditions and tries to make the most of it by continuing to send Akunna to school in order to let her fetch a higher bride price. But at the same time Akunna is instilled with the hope of making a difference in her life as a teacher, a thought unheard of in the previous generation.

But life in Ibuza is a barrier to the ennobling effect of education. As a victim to the male hegemony of the land, she is finally hounded to death by the laws inflicted on women. As she ruminates on her sad plight later on, she realizes:

If she was forced to live with these people for long, she would soon die, for that was the intention behind all these taboos and customs. Anyone who contravened them was better dead. If you tried to hang on to life, you would gradually be helped towards death by psychological pressures. And when you were dead, people would ask: Did we not say so? Nobody goes against the laws of the land and survives. (148)

Her marital life with Chike, even though initially joyous, was later on crossed by Akunna’s spells of depression and failing health: “I know my uncle does not want even to accept the bride price. He
calls me back in the wind, when I am alone. But I shall not answer” (171). The plaintive cry of the young African woman who tries to hang on to life ousting traditional mechanisms of mental slavery rends the hearts of the readers. It is these customs and beliefs that Emercheta ironically points out in her concluding remark on the tale- “So it was that Chike and AkuNna substantiated the traditional superstition they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. Every girl in Ibuza after AkuNna’s death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land” (176).

Thus The Bride Price is a thesis on the coercive effect of conflicting ideologies- that tug of war between the communal will and individual will. Akunna does not actually die due to a voodoo plot, but due to the fear that such a curse is bound to spirit her away:

Fate or destiny is based on the function of social institutions and the shaping patterns of cultural traditions. In the woman’s experience, fate is, therefore, the collective will of the community. In a subjective and much more crucial sense, the fate of each woman is ultimately determined by the extent to which she accepts or rejects that collective will. (Brown, Women Writers 49)

The tragic story narrated about the budding Ibuza girl who tried to flout tradition is recorded poignantly by Emecheta in The Bride Price. The heavy hand of patriarchy coerces the women of the land to live in ignominy or perish upon trying to escape its tentacles. Though
Akunna’s death stands for the psychological power of entrenched tradition, the birth of their daughter ‘Joy’ symbolizes a new era for African womanhood. This daughter seems to be Emecheta’s hope for the future of the African woman.

Akunna, the Emechetaen daughter belonging to the pre-colonial period, emerges as a martyr to the cause of women’s liberation. Though she finally submits to the haunting power of traditional dogmas, she tries to make her voice heard, a feeble voice, nevertheless a voice raised amid all the passive acceptance of sexual slavery. It is this faint voice that finds an echo in a more articulate questioning by Nnu Ego of her tradition and society in Joys of Motherhood. Transplanted for life from rural village settings to urban city, the African woman undergoes a transition even more marked later on with Western education in the succeeding generation as epitomized in the protagonist of Destination Biafra. In short, freedom for women from age-old superstitions and customs stems from education.

The capacity to reason out a life of her own and to come to a consensus on her African selfhood is the major conflict emerging in each of these novels. Though there is an underlying strain of love for natural and traditional mode of love, Emecheta charts out the need for the women of Africa to come out of her restrictive hut and reach out for wider expanses and unlimited opportunities. When Africa was brought into contact with the outer world with colonization, its
women folk ventured out in search of better options. The culture conflict syndrome, reflected in Emecheta’s novels, is similar to male canonical literature but has a different story to narrate, as it focuses on the second sex of the society. Here it is Beatrice in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* that takes on the centre stage and hence the hypothesis of the educated women being the voice of the group. As a pre-colonial figure Akunna hardly manifests the problems of postcolonial bifurcation of double colonization like Nnu Ego in Lagos or the racial question of Kehinde’s London, nor the creole identity in Gwendolen, the heroines in her later novels. Thus Emecheta could be seen tracing out the metamorphosis of the African woman through historical and geographically wide ranging adventures.

*Joys of Motherhood*, the most commented on work by Buchi Emecheta, is a product of the initial phase of her writing career. Published in 1979, this novel speaks of the Nigeria during the precolonial and colonial period and the existent social situation. The changing scenario from African villages to urban towns is a picture of the transformative effect of history and the epoch making invasion of foreigners into the land. This work focuses on urban Lagos of the colonized era and the lives of African women in rural Ibuza during precolonial times in the portrayal of the protagonist Nnu Ego and her mother Ona. It deals with the culture collision involved in the impact of colonization as in Achebe’s works, but from a woman’s point of view. In the early part of the novel Emecheta unfolds the story of Ona
and her lover Chief Agbadi. In the later chapters which focus on the story of Nnu Ego, the ambience is the postcolonial Africa.

The novel *Joys of Motherhood* projects African womanhood in the initial stages of colonization. The mother’s mother, Ona, figuring in the initial part of the novel, gives us an insight into the life of the African woman as a free native. Nnu Ego, her daughter, is the scion of the later generation, during the onset of colonization/westernization. The shift from the precolonial conditions to colonial hangover is an interesting graph to survey. Emecheta judiciously uses such a setting and locale to picture the transformation in the conceptualization of womanhood in a specifically African milieu.

As the colonized or the subjugated race, the natives undergo a psychological breaking down of their defenses. The people occupying the centre (Europeans) consign the marginals to relative obscurity. They are also called worthless and puerile in Macaulay’s *Minutes on Education* in India. In the novel *The Joys of Motherhood* the African situation is brought into relief. Colonization and its resultant emasculation process for the subjugated group are expounded in the changing conditions of African nature. The white colonial masters tried to project the African as slow and lazy, as pointed out in Said’s *Orientalism*, but we can see from the native literature that it is the superior attitude of the colonizers that converted the vigorous race into one of slovenliness. The great chief and hunter Agbadi, evaluated the ‘white man’s job’ in urban cities like Lagos: “He could not help feeling
that only lazy men who could not face farm work went to the coast to work” (JM 37). He is right in thinking that working for the white man is degrading. The men who went to the urban areas in search of jobs became emasculated in the menial jobs like washing up and cooking-jobs, which were an exclusive female domain in the traditional world. African men had earlier prided themselves in being good hunters and providers, braving all adverse conditions. But they beget a slave mentality and passiveness once they fit themselves into the colonized ‘black slave’ category. Nnaife is depicted as “one of those Africans who were so used to being told they were stupid in those days that they started to believe in their own imperfection” (83). He accepts all the slurs and taunts meted out by his masters without any demur: “He would simply shrug his shoulders and say, ‘We work for them and they pay us. He calling me a baboon does not make me one’” (42).

The technique used by Emecheta to introduce the two characters Nnaife and Nnu Ego is striking. A definite reversal of the accepted conventions of gender roles is adopted for presenting the characters. The comment made by Nnu Ego on first seeing him is, “why, marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle aged woman!” (42). This reversal is seen in Nnu Ego’s depiction too. She is introduced to us as “wrestling like a man” (60) when someone tries to stop her from committing suicide. As the plot progresses, Nnaife’s job is washing clothes for the white woman, a job traditionally reserved exclusively for women; and Nnu Ego is setting up the occupation of trading in order to support the family. To
quote Cordelia, Nnu Ego’s friend, the situation can be summed up thus: “Men here are too busy being white men’s servants to be men. We women mind the home not our husbands. Their manhood has been taken from them” (51). Towards the end we also see that in the years of Nnaife’s absence, it is Nnu Ego who has to support the family alone.

The shift from traditional to modern settings during colonization unsettles the African woman socially and economically. With the Victorian gender constraints being foisted on her, she is relegated to the private sphere and loses her economic independence.

African studies have established the fact undeniably that the women of the pre-colonial times were more independent and had greater autonomy over themselves than their colonized successors. Women were economically, politically, socially and spiritually on a par with and at times superior to men in Africa in those days. The African woman, especially the Igbo woman (featured in Emecheta’s works), is economically self-reliant. They took up farming and trading on the products for their up-keep. They wielded political and social power and economic independence and led autonomous lives. They had a voice in matters relating to their lives and were also economic producers, excelling in agrarian occupation. Each woman had her own hut even within her polygamous household. Matriarchal system was part of the social system in parts of East and West Africa. Rolf Solberg says:
In most traditional African societies, there was a fairly well defined pattern of duties and responsibilities shared by the males and females. By and large, the male was the dominant partner but in most societies women had considerable power and exercised political influence that women still lack in advanced western societies today. And even in tribes, where male authority was largely unchallenged, such as the Igbo tribe of Eastern Nigeria, she often enjoyed a considerable amount of independence socially, and especially economically. (72)

The Matrilineal power exemplified by the Queen of Asante and other heroic figures like the legendary Amazonian Queen Hippolyta, serves to give credence to this statement about womanpower in pre-colonial Africa.

Ona, the ‘Mother’s Mother’, in *Joys of Motherhood* epitomizes this streak of capability and strength of the African foremothers. It is such inherited independence of spirit that made her hold out against the indomitable will of the chief Agbadi to make her marry him and thus add her to his harem of wives. Such fierce resistance to his domination was the factor that fanned Agbadi’s passion for Ona.

In his young days a woman who gave in to a man without first fighting for her honor was never respected. To regard a woman who is quiet and timid as desirable was
something that came after his time, with Christianity and other changes. *(JM 10)*

The pen portrait of Ona is that of an exceptional woman who is given more freedom than her peers as the only daughter of a great Chief. The fact that Ona, despite her overpowering love for Agbadi, decides that her first loyalty is to her father and not to her lover is an example of the independent mentality characteristic of the pre-colonial woman. Though Ona is a colourful example of the precolonial autonomy of the African female, she could be considered one of the luckier of their sisterhood. As the petted daughter of a great chief, she was accorded more privileges than most others. Despite political and economic independence, evidenced in sociological study, women were under the strict thumb of patriarchy. In *Joys of Motherhood*, which gives the picture of precolonial and colonial African woman through Ona and Nnu Ego, Emecheta resorts to symbolic representation. Though Ona is depicted as the free spirited precolonial woman who refuses to be added to his harem, the novel relates a graphic episode of Agbadi overpowering Ona sexually. This shows that despite relative freedom of the African female of the precolonial era, she is still considered an object to be tamed by the male. Again as a representative of the persecuted African woman, Nnu Ego’s story is, according to Emecheta, the true version of the venerated ‘African Mother’.

The African woman is distinctly kept under control throughout her life under male subjugation. Patriarchal hegemony has woman
under its thumb and it dictates what shape a woman’s life should take. This is seen in the crude custom of genital mutilation and in the straightjacketting of women into the polygamous system. It is seen also in the biased concept that motherhood is fruitful only on giving birth to sons. In the figure of the colonized Nnu Ego, Emecheta records the negative nature of the idolatry of motherhood. For the schizophrenic identity of heroine vacillating between traditional and westernized protocols, motherhood, though long sought after, becomes a hearse. Emecheta also records motherhood, the basic factor of African womanhood – as representing the tragic outcome of colonialism:

The dead child she starts her childbearing career with after the initial barreness denotes the stultifying atmosphere of colonialism. Their child dies, to show that colonialism had dealt their vital part a death blow. She ends her childbearing phase with a still birth, the thwarting of their dreams. (Ogunyemi, African Wo/man Palava 260)

The life of the African woman also was under the distinct control of the male. Working in the house as well as in the farmland, they carried a double yoke, without much economic dividends. For women the Marxian concept of alienation is enforced not only in public employment but also in private life. They do not have any control over reproduction and sexuality. This is particularly relevant
in the case of the African society, where once married, even the children produced are the possession of the father, regardless of the fact that they may not be his biological products. The ownership privilege of the male in this system reveals the male superiority rampant in Africa. Women had to suppress their own needs in order to provide emotional and material support to the male of the family. These aspects of female subordination find expression in Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood*, which portrays the trials of the black woman in an urban colony.

In short, the African civilization was blatantly patriarchal, as one is forced to realize throughout the novel. The social status of men and women in the society is clearly defined:

> You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them…A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified. (71)

Here one finds the African woman being consigned a useful role only as a mother. Inability to conceive was an unpardonable sin in the culture and she would be considered a ‘failed woman’. Nnu Ego on being barren with her first husband Amatokwu, is told brutally that she has failed in her duty and has to make way for a new wife, denying her even the basic conjugal rights: “I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile” (32). Thus she is cast off in ignominy to her father’s house, from
which she is hastily married off to a Nnaife in Lagos. There she becomes a mother (mother of sons too) with a vengeance and it is her co-wife Adaku who bears the stigma of being unable to produce male line for her husband. The conditioned attitude of society towards patriarchal righteousness is proved in the words of the neighbour who castigates Adaku for fighting with Nnu Ego, saying that she has no right to raise her voice since she has failed in her role in life, i.e. in ensuring immortality of her husband by producing male offspring for him.

A correlated evil is that of polygamy. Since women were of utilitarian value, polygamy was accepted in the traditional societies. But the family unit in those days followed practical conventions. It allowed each woman autonomy of her hut and also provided women’s solidarity by which they were able to question undue control by the husband. But according to these customs, the male had certain duties towards his wife, which he had to follow notwithstanding his own private wishes. Any deviation was strictly brought to order by the women’s organization. In the pre-colonial societies these women’s groups exerted certain rights in maintaining the law and order in the relationships between the sexes as clearly depicted in Amadi’s *Estrangement*. Later this system broke down under the changes brought on by modernization. In the urban areas such village measures were inapplicable and women came under excessive sexual and psychological exploitation. Such a condition is seen in *Joys of Motherhood*. Women who share a husband have two grounds of
anxiety--the insecurity of their own position and also that of their children. Nnu Ego and Adaku are jealous and suspicious of each other’s motives since they are insecure about their own and their progeny’s value. “Nnu Ego keenly envies Adaku`s success as a trader, while Adaku would willingly surrender all her wealth for one of Nnu Ego`s sons” (Frank, *Death of the Slave Girl* 488). Thus we find Nnu Ego ending up with more children than she could provide for and Adaku (unable to mother sons) with the profession of prostitution.

The concept of motherhood in the life of the Africa woman is a much hyped one. This novel is a subversive attack on old customs and outdated notions. The value of a woman being measured on the basis of her reproductive faculty was a custom in African societies. Marriage was considered to be the ultimate goal for the female and motherhood the only fulfilment in female life. Women were valuable only as carriers of the male seed and as machines producing a male line for her husband. “The only power a woman possesses is her procreative power, and if she is unable to exercise it, she is deemed useless and expendable, both in her own eyes and in those of her culture” (Frank, *Death of the Slave Girl* 480). So the tradition bound Nnu Ego considers motherhood an honour investment which should be cherished or endured at whatever cost to herself. But finally she realizes that her motherhood, instead of being a joy for her, was proving to be the chains of slavery imprisoned as she was by her love for her children.
God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself not anybody’s appendage?...When will I be free?...I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood ...having to live up to the standard expected out of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband, and now I have to include my sons. (186-87)

Thus the devout worship of the appellation ‘mother of sons’ does not bring gratification to Nnu Ego. As her life burns out, she realizes that it was one given up in vain. She realizes in the end the value of daughters when only they remain with her during the last part of her life. She makes an inventory of the achievements in her life and realizes that she the happy bride of Amatokwu was slighted and degraded by her husband, once she was found infertile. She had found solace in the feminine Nnaife on the sole count that he was able to provide her children and thus make her a real woman. But this too had bounced back on her leaving her to die alone without anyone near her:

Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends; so busy she had been building up her joys as a mother. (224)

The novel brings out the complete futility of such ‘fulfilment’, thus decrying the traditional African belief “mother is supreme”.
The sad end of Nnu Ego is akin to martyrdom and so as to suggest it Emecheta ironically titles the last chapter ‘Canonized Motherhood’. She who venerated the edifice of motherhood as per custom, sacrificed herself upon it. Her death, uncared for like a tramp, is Emecheta’s mockery of such African beliefs as the sanctity of motherhood. She seems to be highlighting the necessity to erase away old beliefs and to search for new values represented by her co-wife Adaku. As a conforming ‘feminine’ role model, Nnu Ego realizes herself only after her death; though many appealed to her to make women fertile, it was never answered. An example of such a postcolonial woman losing her sanity on severe tasking of her identity is seen in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Likewise in *Joys of Motherhood*, it is the questioning of her identity as a woman when she is unable to give children for her husband that initially makes Nnu Ego unbalanced. Madness seems to be a mode of the feminine self to project its bruised ego and rebellion against patriarchal dictates.

Nnu Ego realizes herself and the meaning (lessness) of her life on her death. Upon equating motherhood with enslavement rather than an idolized vocation, she rejects vehemently any prayer at her shrine for fertility. In her life a martyr for motherhood, in her death she denounces such blind acceptance of social mores.

Indeed the historical crisis that swept over Africa in the name of colonialism was catalytical in bringing about such changes in the living patterns of the African society. The old concepts such as the
economic independence of the female yielded place to the new notions brought on by colonialism.

Once they come under colonial dictates women lose many of their pre-colonial qualities like independence of outlook. The colonial circumstances change Nnu Ego to the extent that she is ready to give up the basic attribute of the Igbo woman and accept her husband as the sole breadwinner. Her argument should be noted:

She might not have any money to supplement her husband`s income, but were they not in the white man`s world where it was the duty of the father to provide for the family? In Ibuza, women made a contribution, but in urban Lagos, men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed the woman of her useful role. Nnu Ego told herself that …she had been trying to be a traditional woman in a modern urban setting. It was because she wanted to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos that she lost her child. This time she was going to play it according to the new rules. (81)

But this complete abandoning of herself to the new rules (western construct of women) does not help Nnu Ego far. When Nnaife loses his job, she suddenly finds it incumbent upon herself to maintain a large family of a husband and seven children, two co-wives and their two progenies each, as per the African tradition of the senior 'mother' being the backbone of the family. Due to the strain of
having to conform to the expectation of the African tradition in urban setting, Nnu Ego finds herself playing dual roles in a dichotomous life.

The changing flux of time brings about new values in the place of old ones. We see Nnu Ego who tries to conform to the outdated values perishing in ignominy whereas Adaku, her rebellious co-wife, embracing the new order gaining her personal and emotional liberation from the tyranny of traditionality. This woman of the new order also decides to educate her daughters as Nnu Ego did her male children. Here she figures as the pioneering figure that opens the door to progress through education of women. Thus education, one of the boons brought to African land by colonization, paves the way for the changing nature of the African culture and its women. The change in perception and lifestyle of the womanhood in Africa and their identity can be pieced together from this novel. The initial brainwashing of the credulous African civilization by the imported value system and ideas and the subsequent questioning of it can be found in the characterization of Nnu Ego. She is also a poignant picture of the liminal world–between the traditional and westernized community, unable to figure out her position as a woman and as an individual.

Colonisation had certain positive effects too in terms of modernization and education. Africa came into contact with the wider world in this process and the Christian missionaries brought the light of knowledge with them which they imparted to the people of the
country. But here too the African woman was at a disadvantage since Christian missionaries followed the patriarchal conviction that consigned women to being secondary receivers of knowledge. The social condition can be seen in Nnu Ego slaving away to educate her sons. She gives them university education and sends them abroad whereas she asks her daughters to work with her in order to complement their tuition fees. Later we see Adaku, her co-wife, rebelling against this gender discrimination. Adaku taunted on by the stigma of being unable to mother sons, revolts against the traditional system, leaves her husband and seeks economic freedom and ease of living. She chooses to be a prostitute which alone ensures her freedom of living rather than live in the cramped apartment on meagre living. Her realization that “we women set impossible standards for ourselves….I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters” (169-70) is that of a woman on the path to emancipation physically and psychologically. This bold step brings out a new woman who, Emecheta records, is happier and economically very well able to hold her own against any man. She creates a space for herself in the society and brings up her daughters as privileged women of the future generation who have a good education.

Westernization that emasculated the man in turn is reflexively beneficial to the woman. She learns to fend for herself in adverse situations. The new freedom enjoined by it gives Nnu Ego the strength to rebel against her husband’s subjugation of her according to the
traditional patriarchal set up (48-49). Colonization, though degrading to the African culture, did bring in its wake opportunities of liberation and selfhood for women. In this context it could be said that, “the rural African culture, though sexist and patriarchal, is considered authentic and ideal and the urban colonial culture though racist is liberating for women” (O’Brien 96). Thus we find that colonization was a nodal point in the history of Africa and the life of the African people. The women of Africa too find their mode of life dramatically changing with the onset of colonization.

African social situation of the period can also be understood from elements in Emecheta’s other novels too. A work by Emecheta that belongs to the same period in African history i.e., pre/colonial Africa is The Slave Girl. This novel in Emechete’s repertoire is a fictionalized narrative of the life story of her mother, who was sold into slavery by her brother. The protagonist is named Ogbanje Ojebeta and she finally acquires the English name of Alice, as is the case of Emecheta’s mother. Here the story is set initially in Ibuza, rural Nigeria, with the narrative centering on Ojebeta’s petted childhood as the only girl child. But misfortune befalls her at her seventh year when all her family except her brother Okolie die succumbing to Influenza (brought to the land by the west). Okolie represents, as Rose Ure Mezu points out tradition which “confers on men total power over all females, be they wives or daughters or sisters” (Mezu 140). He takes his young sister to Onitsha, the trading centre of Eastern Nigeria, and sells her to Ma Palagada, a distant
relative, who is a successful business woman with a number of slaves to assist her. In detailing the life of slavery of Ojebeta and her mates, Emecheta describes the degradation and limitations of one’s individualism and also the sexual exploitation concomitant with slavery. “Even Ma Palagada’s characteristic benevolence does not counteract the effects of the severe treatment meted out by her husband and her daughter” (SG 137).

As Nnu Ego enslaved by her husband and sons cries out, “Oh God, when will I be free?”, Ogbange’s constant plea is “Please dear God no, please, must I be a slave forever?” (126).

It is when Ma Palagada dies that Ojebeta gains a chance for freedom and returns to Ibuza. But it soon becomes apparent that being free does not liberate her from being the ‘possession’ of the males of the community. As soon as she reaches the village, her uncles start arguing over who should be the recipient of her bride price. Some even plot to cut off a lock of her hair and thus mark her off and thus push her into marriage. Ojebeta muses that- “if she must marry and belong to a man according to the customs of her people, then ... it would be better to be a slave to a master of your choice” (168).

Even then the novel moves on to show that a woman is a commodity to the African patriarchal world: ‘The dibia’ whom they consult upon Ojebeta’s constant miscarriage insists that she must be repurchased by her husband from Clifford, the Palagada’s son. The complete subjugation of the woman in ancient African community finds
expression in the character of Ojebeta (mechanized to slavery) who says in the concluding chapter: “Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master” (179). This projects the hegemonic power of patriarchy inherent within the structure of old African society.

It is this belief indoctrinated into the African women that creates the most binding psychological ditch of all that she has to climb out of; it is the same monster in the ditch that kills AkuNna in *The Bride Price* despite her valiant struggle against it. Such a psychological make-up which casts the women as slaves is symbolised in the novel, *The Slave Girl*. As Lloyd Brown says her dependency, apathy, and ingrained habit of accepting a subordinate status are equated with a slave mentality (53).

This is reinforced later by Christian dogmas which Western education disseminates freely to the colonized. As women they were taught that:

There was certainly a kind of eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced maybe by centuries of tradition, taboos, and latterly, Christian dogma. Slave, obey your master. Wife, honour your husband, who is your father, your head, your heart, your soul. (*SG* 179)

When the Victorian ideals for women get embroiled in the western education, women again find themselves in a double bind.
This double colonization that fetters the progress of womankind can be distinctly seen in *The Slave Girl*. Western education meted out to the colonised is steeped in Victorian ideals of male / female gender bias. In *The Slave Girl* we see that after giving the girls rudimentary literacy, they are made to learn only homemaking skills. They enroll in an academy where she learns to bake, crochet and embroider, thus confining her within the four walls of the house. The Victorian paternalistic approach instilled into the young women who come into contact with western culture again ensures the submissive part played by women in society. This in some respects is self defeating as the traditional African culture gave its women some amount of independence. “The alien religion is obviously another of those foreign European influences that have helped to undermine local values” (Brown, *Women Writers* 57).

The tradition of West African village of Ibuza was extremely patriarchal since a woman was always considered some male relatives’ possession. She was owned in her youth by her father or someone in the place of her father as we see in Akunna’s case or in general by her group, or homestead. Nnu Ego’s rebellion against it also has been recorded. In Ojebeta’s case, the situation is even more pathetic. As she reflects:

All her life a woman always belonged to some male. At birth you were owned by your people, and when you were sold you belonged to a new master, when you grew
up your new master who paid something for you would control you. (113)

Therefore Ojebete’s life is a series of encounters with slavery, being sold and bought by her brother, the master and finally by the husband.

Emecheta’s novels represent African women writing at its very best – representing as it does women’s determined effort to liberate themselves. These show women as enduring their lot as the oppressed and the victimized. Emecheta’s women, however, rage against their lot; and pass through a rebellious phase. This progression leads them to emancipation in course of time. Whereas Nnu Ego perished protesting futilely against servitude, AkuNna being more educated makes a valiant bid for freedom. Yet being too close to the binding effect of precolonial hegemony, they figure as martyrs to the cause of women’s liberation.