



Exploring oppression and female subjugation

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Abstract

African literature has consistently addressed issues of oppression, colonial domination, gender inequality, and the social marginalization of women. Among the prominent African feminist writers, occupies a significant position because of her powerful portrayal of women's struggles within patriarchal African societies. Her novel (1977) is a profound exploration of slavery, gender discrimination, cultural oppression, and female subjugation in traditional Igbo society during the colonial period in Nigeria. The novel narrates the tragic yet inspiring story of Ojebeta, a young girl sold into slavery by her own brother after the death of their parents. Through Ojebeta's experiences, Emecheta reveals how women are commodified, oppressed, and denied autonomy in patriarchal structures. This study examines the various forms of oppression and female subjugation represented in the novel. It analyzes the interconnected systems of patriarchy, slavery, colonialism, and economic exploitation that shape women's lives. The paper also explores the psychological and emotional suffering experienced by women characters, particularly Ojebeta, while emphasizing their resilience and struggle for identity and freedom. Emecheta critiques the traditional cultural norms that reduce women to property and highlights the paradox of freedom in a society where women continue to remain under male control even after the abolition of slavery.

The study adopts a feminist and postcolonial approach to analyze the novel's thematic concerns. It argues that Emecheta uses Ojeeta's life as a metaphor for the condition of African women who face continuous oppression under patriarchal institutions. The novel not only exposes the cruelty of domestic slavery but also presents a broader criticism of gender inequality in African society. Ultimately, the study concludes that is a powerful feminist text advocating women's dignity, selfhood, and liberation.

Keywords: Oppression, female subjugation, patriarchy, slavery, feminism, colonialism, african literature, Buchi Emecheta, gender inequality

Introduction

African women writers have played a significant role in exposing the realities of women's oppression in traditional and colonial African societies. Through literature, they challenge patriarchal ideologies and advocate women's empowerment and liberation. Among these writers, stands out for her commitment to portraying the experiences of African women subjected to discrimination, exploitation, and social injustice. Her works often focus on themes such as motherhood, female identity, education, slavery, and resistance against patriarchy.

Published in 1977, is one of Emecheta's most celebrated novels. Set in colonial Nigeria in the early twentieth century, the novel portrays the life of Ojebeta, a young Igbo girl who becomes a victim of domestic slavery after the death of her parents. The story reflects the harsh realities of African women's lives within a patriarchal and economically unequal society. The novel demonstrates how women are treated as commodities whose value is determined by men and social traditions.

The novel begins with the loving relationship between Ojebeta and her parents in the town of Ibuza. However, tragedy strikes when both parents die, leaving Ojebeta vulnerable and defenseless. Her elder brother, Okolie, motivated by selfish desires and economic greed, sells her into slavery to Ma Palagada, a wealthy trader in Onitsha. This incident symbolizes the dehumanization of women within patriarchal systems where women are denied agency and treated as objects of exchange.

Emecheta presents slavery not merely as a historical institution but also as a metaphor for women's oppression. Although Ojebeta eventually gains freedom, her marriage

again places her under male ownership, suggesting that African women continue to experience forms of slavery even after legal emancipation. The novel therefore critiques both traditional African patriarchy and colonial influences that reinforced women's marginalization.

One of the central concerns of the novel is the intersection of gender and economic exploitation. Women in the novel are valued according to their labor and reproductive abilities rather than their individuality or humanity. Domestic slavery particularly affects young girls who are deprived of childhood, education, and freedom. Through Ojebeta's suffering, Emecheta exposes the emotional trauma and psychological damage caused by oppression and exploitation.

Another important aspect of the novel is the role of culture and tradition in sustaining female subjugation. Patriarchal customs such as bride price, arranged marriage, and domestic servitude reinforce male dominance and female dependency. Women are expected to remain obedient and submissive, while men control social, economic, and political power. Emecheta questions these oppressive traditions and advocates social transformation through awareness and resistance.

The novel also highlights women's resilience and survival. Despite her suffering, Ojebeta gradually develops self-awareness and inner strength. Her journey from slavery to selfhood symbolizes the struggle of African women against oppressive systems. Emecheta thus combines criticism of patriarchy with a celebration of women's endurance and determination.

As a feminist text, contributes significantly to African feminist discourse. It challenges stereotypes about African

women and reveals the complexity of their experiences under colonial and patriarchal domination. The novel demonstrates that oppression is not only physical but also psychological, cultural, and economic. Through vivid storytelling and realistic characterization, Emecheta exposes the mechanisms through which women are marginalized and controlled.

This study seeks to explore the various dimensions of oppression and female subjugation portrayed in the novel. It analyzes how Emecheta critiques patriarchy, slavery, and gender inequality while emphasizing women's struggle for identity and freedom.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the representation of oppression and female subjugation in.
2. To analyze the role of patriarchy in shaping women's lives in traditional Igbo society.
3. To explore the relationship between slavery and gender discrimination in the novel.
4. To study the psychological and emotional impact of oppression on women characters.
5. To investigate the role of colonialism and economic exploitation in reinforcing female marginalization.
6. To evaluate Ojebeta's struggle for identity, dignity, and freedom.
7. To examine Emecheta's feminist perspective and critique of patriarchal traditions.

Subject Matter

▪ Patriarchy and the Marginalization of Women

Patriarchy is one of the dominant themes in the novel portrays a society where men possess authority over women and determine their social roles. Women are denied independence and are expected to remain obedient to male authority. From childhood, girls are taught to accept submission as a natural condition.

Ojebeta's life reflects this patriarchal reality. Although she is loved by her parents, her social value remains connected to her future marriage and domestic role. After her parents' death, her brother assumes complete authority over her life. He sells her without considering her feelings or consent. This incident reveals the absence of women's rights within patriarchal systems.

The novel demonstrates that patriarchy reduces women to property. Men exercise ownership over women's bodies, labor, and choices. Even marriage functions as a system of control where women become dependent on husbands. Emecheta criticizes these patriarchal practices and exposes their dehumanizing effects on women.

▪ Slavery as a Symbol of Female Oppression

Slavery in the novel represents both literal and symbolic oppression. Ojebeta is physically sold into domestic slavery, but her experience also symbolizes the broader condition of African women. The title itself emphasizes the connection between slavery and female identity.

Under Ma Palagada's household, Ojebeta performs domestic labor and lives under strict control. Although she receives some care and education, she lacks personal freedom. Her labor benefits others while her individuality remains suppressed. Emecheta presents slavery as a system that destroys human dignity and identity.

The novel suggests that women continue to experience forms of slavery even after legal emancipation. Marriage becomes another form of ownership where women remain economically and socially dependent on men. Thus, Emecheta broadens the meaning of slavery to include patriarchal domination and gender inequality.

▪ Economic Exploitation and Commodification of Women

Economic factors play a crucial role in the oppression of women in the novel. Poverty and financial insecurity contribute to Ojebeta's sale into slavery. Her brother views her as a commodity whose sale can provide economic benefits. This commodification reflects a society where women are valued according to their economic usefulness rather than their humanity.

Women's labor is also exploited throughout the novel. Female slaves perform domestic and commercial work that sustains the wealth of their owners. However, they receive little recognition or autonomy. Emecheta highlights how economic systems reinforce women's dependence and vulnerability.

The novel also shows how capitalism and colonial trade contribute to social inequality. Wealthy traders such as Ma Palagada gain power through commercial activities, while poor families become more vulnerable to exploitation. Women suffer the most within this unequal economic structure.

▪ Colonialism and Social Transformation

The novel is set during the colonial period in Nigeria, and colonialism significantly influences the social environment. European colonial rule introduces Christianity, Western education, and new economic systems. However, these changes do not necessarily improve women's condition.

Colonialism interacts with traditional patriarchy to create complex forms of oppression. While colonial institutions claim to promote civilization, women continue to face discrimination and exploitation. Emecheta demonstrates that colonial modernity often fails to liberate African women from patriarchal structures.

At the same time, colonial education offers limited opportunities for women. Ojebeta gains exposure to literacy and urban life, which contribute to her self-awareness. Education therefore becomes a potential tool for empowerment, although social constraints continue to restrict women's freedom.

▪ Psychological Trauma and Emotional Suffering

Oppression in the novel is not only physical but also psychological. Ojebeta experiences loneliness, fear, insecurity, and emotional pain after being separated from her family. The trauma of slavery deeply affects her sense of identity and belonging.

Emecheta vividly portrays the emotional suffering of women who are denied love, freedom, and dignity. Ojebeta constantly longs for home and family. Her memories of childhood become a source of emotional strength and resistance. The psychological impact of oppression reveals the human cost of patriarchal and economic exploitation.

Women in the novel also internalize oppression. Many female characters accept patriarchal norms as natural and unavoidable. This internalized subjugation demonstrates how oppressive systems maintain control through social conditioning.

▪ **Women Oppressing Women**

An important aspect of the novel is the role of women in sustaining patriarchal structures. Ma Palagada, despite being a woman, owns slaves and participates in systems of exploitation. She benefits economically from the labor of slave girls and reinforces social hierarchies.

Emecheta therefore presents oppression as a complex social system involving both men and women. Some women gain power within patriarchy by participating in the exploitation of other women.

However, the novel also portrays solidarity among female slaves. Ojebeta develops emotional bonds with other women who share similar experiences of suffering. These relationships provide comfort and support, suggesting the importance of female solidarity in resisting oppression.

▪ **Resistance and the Quest for Identity**

Despite her oppression, Ojebeta does not completely lose her individuality. She gradually develops self-awareness and a desire for freedom. Her memories of home and her determination to reclaim dignity symbolize resistance against dehumanization.

Emecheta portrays resistance in subtle but significant ways. Ojebeta's emotional resilience, personal dreams, and eventual return to her homeland represent acts of survival and self-assertion. Although she remains constrained by patriarchal society, she achieves a degree of personal autonomy.

The novel suggests that liberation is a gradual and difficult process. Women's resistance often occurs within restrictive social environments where complete freedom remains elusive. Nevertheless, Emecheta emphasizes the importance of selfhood and dignity in challenging oppression.

Feminist Vision in the Novel

is widely regarded as a major African feminist writer because of her commitment to exposing women's suffering and advocating gender equality. In, she critiques patriarchal traditions that reduce women to objects of exchange and labor.

Emecheta's feminism differs from Western radical feminism because it acknowledges the cultural and historical realities of African society. She does not completely reject African traditions but challenges practices that oppress women. Her feminist vision emphasizes education, self-awareness, economic independence, and dignity for women.

The novel advocates social reform by exposing injustice and encouraging empathy for oppressed women. Through Ojebeta's story, Emecheta calls for a society where women are recognized as human beings with rights, aspirations, and individuality.

Conclusion

is a powerful literary work that exposes the realities of oppression and female subjugation in traditional and colonial African society. Through the tragic yet inspiring story of Ojebeta, presents a profound critique of patriarchy, slavery, economic exploitation, and gender inequality. The novel reveals how women are treated as commodities and denied autonomy within systems dominated by male authority.

Emecheta successfully demonstrates that oppression operates through multiple interconnected structures, including family, culture, economy, and colonialism.

Women experience physical, emotional, and psychological suffering as a result of these oppressive systems. Ojebeta's sale into slavery symbolizes the broader condition of African women who remain trapped within patriarchal institutions even after legal emancipation.

The novel also highlights the complexity of female oppression by showing how women themselves sometimes participate in exploitative systems. Characters such as Ma Palagada benefit from structures that subordinate other women, revealing the internal contradictions of patriarchal society. At the same time, the novel emphasizes female solidarity, resilience, and survival.

One of the most important achievements of the novel is its portrayal of women's resistance and search for identity. Despite severe hardships, Ojebeta retains her humanity and gradually develops self-awareness. Her journey symbolizes the struggle of African women to reclaim dignity and freedom in oppressive societies.

Emecheta's feminist perspective remains highly relevant in contemporary discussions about gender justice and women's rights. The novel encourages readers to question cultural traditions and social structures that perpetuate inequality. It also emphasizes the importance of education, economic independence, and selfhood in women's liberation.

In conclusion, is not merely a story about slavery but a broader commentary on women's oppression in African society. The novel remains an important contribution to African feminist literature because of its realistic portrayal of female suffering, resilience, and resistance. Through her compelling narrative, Emecheta advocates a more humane and equitable society where women are respected as individuals rather than treated as property or instruments of labor.

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