

Revisiting Slavery in the Twentieth Century Africa in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*

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Abstract: *This article aims at showing that Africans are as responsible as Europeans for the enslavement of the men and women during that period through a work of fiction. For one thing, despite the abolition of slave trade, African Kings/Queens, monarchs, nobles and families, just to name only a few people, still find it normal to sell their kinsmen to others. For another thing, other Africans, owing to their needs and mentality, buy and own slaves in order to use them without any pay, thus depriving them of all human rights. The results are heart-breaking: slave dealers forget about the slaves after receiving their price, while slave buyers and owners ill-treat slaves in such a way that they are regarded as nothing. We have used the sociological methodology to show how deeply the phenomenon of slavery is rooted in the Ibo and African community before the Europeans could set foot in Africa. We have also used the quantitative and qualitative methods.*

Keywords: Slavery; Girl slaves; Hardships; freedom

1. Introduction

Africa is the only soil where the shameful and ignoble slave trade has been practiced to the extent that many people know. From 1450 to 1850, that practice robbed the black continent of its most valid and valuable economic actors. Through this triangular trade, Europeans came and bought slaves in Africa; then, they sold them in America where they worked in North-American plantations. While this practice has negatively impacted African economies, it has significantly given a real impetus to the economy of the U.S.A thus helping Europe to emerge. It is known that during war time, it was not easy to supplant the enemy without having a bridgehead. In the same way, such bad and dehumanizing practices cannot have taken place without the complicity of African Kings/Queens and nobles. As a matter of fact, the latter used to sell their brothers and sisters to Europeans in exchange for such minor items as mirrors and traditional guns. Despite the abolition of slave trade in 1859, people kept practicing it through informal ways. This gradually spread into all social classes, and some Africans who were great farmers or traders needed slaves, so they bought slaves from their kinsmen. Although it can also be called slave trade at a local level, the slave buyers practiced slavery.

In Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, it was a rather common practice. Indeed, some boys were caught during wars; others, boys and girls, were sold because they were thought to be useless to their community. As far as Ojebeta is concerned, she is sold to Ma Palagada by her senior brother Okolie as their two parents have passed away. He intends to use that money to finance his coming-in-age dance, one of the most important events in his age-group. After he has committed this crime, we discover that this type of trade is habitual in Onitsha market. Women traders are used to buying slaves, mainly girls, to use them for such activities as fetching water at the riverside, cooking, tiding the household, selling, just to quote these activities. The hardships they go through account for the fact that after the abolition of slave trade, slavery

does continue among African communities. This article will be handled in four parts. The first part is about the meaning and the scope of slavery. The second part deals with the specific situation of girls as slaves. The third parts is concerned with the link between Christianity and slavery. The fourth and last part reveals the irony of the Ojebeta's freedom.

2. Slavery: Meaning and Scope

2.1 Definition of Slavery

Slavery is "a condition of having to work very hard without proper remuneration or appreciation. It is the condition of being legally owned by someone else and forced to work for or obey them." (Internet source: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>sl>; 28 December 2022)

In sociology, slavery is "a condition in which one human being was owned by another. A slave was considered by law as property or chattel, and was deprived of most of the rights ordinarily held by free persons" (Richard Hellie; internet source; op.cit; last updated December 11, 2022)

The history of slavery span many cultures, nationalities, and religions from ancient times to the present day. Likewise, its victims have come from different ethnicities religious groups. The social, economic and legal positions of enslaved people have differed vastly in different systems of slavery in different times and places both Christians and Muslims captured and enslaved each other during centuries of warfare in the Mediterranean. Islamic slavery encompassed mainly Western and Central Asia, Northern and Eastern Africa, India and Europe from the 7th to the 20th C. (Source. Internet.en.m.wikimedia.org. Nov. 14th 2022, 5.39 pm).

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The passage above is a quotation from the internet source and shows that slavery is widespread all over the world and through history. This way, slaves have been used in all human societies in small scale for farming activities. For example, in the ancient as underscored by *The Bible* there have been episodes of slavery. We read: "Then Midianite traders passed by; and they drew Joseph and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmalites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt." (Revised Standard Version; Genesis chapter 37 verse 28)

2.2 Origin of Slavery

The narrator of Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* accounts for the origin of slavery as follows:

So renowned was the king that peoples from all regions of the world came to trade with him. The Potokis came to buy slaves, the Gambaris from the north came to sell their captives, Ibos came to sell ivory and sometimes to sell those members of their societies who had committed sins abominable. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 19-20).

This extract reveals the celebrity of a king. Firstly, the Potekis came to buy slaves; secondly, the Gambaris from the North came to sell their captives as slaves, thirdly and lastly Ibos came to sell ivory and sometimes to sell those members of their societies who had committed abominable sins, of course, as slaves. This accounts for the types of human beings who are sold as slaves. On the one hand, they are captives of war. When a kingdom overcomes another, the latter is turned into captives, and as they become its property, they can be sold as slaves. On the other hand, according to the way the society is organized, some sins are not forgivable. Instead of killing and losing the authors of such sins, they sell them as slaves. Talking about Amanna, a girl slave, the narrator reports: "She had been born a twin among people who rejected twins, and though her mother had managed to nurse her secretly for a while, the time had come when it was impossible to keep her any longer, and the child was sold." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 91). This extract shows that twins are not accepted in the Ibo community, so they must be sold as slaves. The narrator also presents another girl slave called Ijeoma. He reports: "The girl called Ijeoma – her name which meant 'good journey' had been given to her by her captors who sold her; it was said she came from Arochukwu when her village was raided by robbers" (Emecheta; 1977; p. 94). Ijeoma is then caught by robbers who raided her village and sold her to Ma Palagada. Sometimes, the capture time is harsher and bloodier. For example, in Hurston's *The Barracoons*, Kossola, the informant who survived the Middle Passage in 1859 after having seen his whole village being raided by the Danhomean women's army, saw his father's head and that of his king cut off as trophies. He recalls the moment this way:

Some never reachee de gate. De women soldier ketchee de young ones and tie dem by de wrist. No man kin be so strong lak de woman soldiers from de Dahomey. So dey cut off de head. Some dey snatch de jaw-bone while de people ain' dead... One

woman-soldier step up wid de machete and chop off de head of de king and pick it off de ground and hand it to de king of Dahomey... my eyes dey stop cryin' but de tears runnee down inside me all de time (Hurston, 45-47).

The case of Kossola seems different from that being presented with Ojebeta and the others. Kossola's testimony is not a fiction, but poignant words from a free born and enslaved by the Danhomean army and finally stayed alive to testify what happened to his tribe in 1859 in the hands of the terrifying King Glèlè, the Lion of the Bush. On the contrary, the slave status of Ojebeta is different from what has been stated above. Kossola's account is the word of a slave who has survived the raid and Middle Passage, whereas Ojebeta's counts for that of a domestic slave. Born an Ogbanje, her father and mother die, intoxicated by a poisonous gas blown by Germans while waging war against the British (pp. 23, 28-29). While her eldest brother, Owezim, decides to flee from this ravaging 'Felenza' and goes to look for a European job, only Okolie, another senior brother, remains in the village. It is high time Okolie passed through the coming-of-age dance (p. 37). But unlike his fellows who work hard for that purpose, he is lazy and decides to sell her off as a slave to their aunt Ma Palagada at the Onitsha market. For Ojebeta not oppose the project, he uses tricks and tells her that their aunt Ma Palagada will help her grow into a great trader. When they finally arrive there, Ma Palagada pays him eight pounds for Ojebeta's price and he vanishes without telling her anything. That is how Ojebeta become one of Ma Palagada's girl slaves. She now faces a new type of life where she cannot do what she wants, apart from being obedient or submissive to her aunt. In fact, although Ma Palagada is her aunt, Ojebeta becomes her mistress and her owner. The marginalization and discrimination in the real-life situation of women is also pervasive through African literature as it has long been known for marginalizing the contribution of female writers of the continent (Arndt, 2002; Stratton, 1990). So the relationships will be quite different. This kind of slavery existed before.

3. The Girl Slaves' Predicament

3.1 The fate of the runaway girl Slaves

Ogbanje Ojebeta is now a girl slave. Right at the beginning, as she doesn't understand why her brother Okolie has brought her into Ma Palagada's hands, she evades into the Onitsha market yearning after him. The narrator accounts for the comments of a senior girl slave. We read: "Poor parentless child. They probably did not tell her. She probably does not know she may never see her brother again. Poor girl!" (Emecheta; 1977; p.56). The mention of the expression "Poor parentless girl" at the beginning and "poor girl" at the end proves that Ojebeta's life as a girl slave will not be easy. After she evades into Onitsha market, the narrator shows that it is an abortive attempt. He writes: "The same fate awaited any runaway domestic slave. Many of the market women had slaves in great number to help them with the fetching and carrying that went with being a full-time trader." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 59) So, it can be deduced that slavery is not new. The trading ladies are all slave owners and do help one another to catch and bring

back runaways. Whenever there is a runaway, the alert is automatic and spontaneous.

When the others:

heard the cries of alarm of the girls at Ma Palagada's stalls, everyone's first involuntary reaction was to look for a club, a knife, even the wooden measuring stick, to arm themselves with ready to fight to protect their own territory, as it were. They all dashed out, led by the poor fisherman who wanted to play the role of a gallant man preserving the woman from robbers. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 59-60).

This means that the newly bought girl slaves cannot succeed in evading. Solidarity among slave owners and their existing slaves accustomed to their doom, armed as if they are running after a robber, is obvious. This is what Chiago, an ancient slave of Ma Palagada says when they catch Ogbanje Ojebeta: "Hold her! Please hold her for me, she is new-hold her." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 60) Therefore, she has the unfailing accountability of bringing Ojebeta back to their mistress. However, during the transatlantic slave trade, some runaway slaves happened to flee undeniably from their owners from the South to the North of America. They could also be helped by other runaway slaves who knew the route to Canada or to Free-states. Those who were caught, according to the Code noir which took shape in Louis XIV's edit of 1685, were heavily punished. The recidivists could lose all their eyes and feet's tendon or hung up. The conditions under which slaves lived in the Americas seem harsher than that described in *The Slave Girl*.

Moreover, Chiago "gripped her tightly, masking her pity for this parentless child by explaining unnecessarily to the crowd, and especially to Ma Mee, that Ojebeta had only just arrived that very afternoon." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 61). Remembering her own case, she feels pity for Ojebeta while gripping her tightly, but she herself is not free to do what she wishes; she is doing what she has been bought for. Although we feel pity for Ojebeta, hers is just a case among many others. Slaves are many at Onitsha market. This is what the narrator says:

Ma Mee did not envy her neighbour for having four girl slaves; and this new little one would bring the total number of Palagada slaves to seven since they also had two male slaves who had been bought or captured...Pa Palagada had bought the men from some Potokis who were leaving the country and returning to their own land. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 61)

This proves that slavery is not new or regarded as abnormal. Slave owners are well-known and are not considered as evildoers. This lessens, not to say cancels, the negativity of slavery. Not only is the practice of slavery seen as a harm to human being, but also slaves, whether men or ladies, lose their identity. The loss of identity is one of the elements in the process of slaves' body and mind dispossession.

3.2 Slaves and the loss of identity and dignity

This is what the boy slaves Pa Palagada have bought mentioned: "The two, who were young boys at the time, could not remember where they had originally come from, so they were given Ibo names and were put to work on the Palagada farms." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 61) A man should clearly identify his origin. This determines his native language, culture, history, just to quote these criteria. They are basic to determine a slave's identity. These two young boys have lost their identity: their origin, family name language and the like, and are given others which have no significance in their lives. Exactly there is also the loss of spiritual and cultural identity. Once the slaves are taken away from their roots, there is a conscious determination from the owner to deprive the slaves from their cultural identity. During the experience of the transatlantic slave trade in Ouidah (Dahomey), slaves were forced to turn around for a number of times a big tree called amnesia tree after having taken a magic potion concocted by the native slave's owner before they could get on board the ship. It aims at making all the slaves forget their culture after a number of turns. It also aims at keeping the slaves out of knowing each other's ethnic group in order to unite for a rebellion. Their new language kept them from plotting or communicating their real wish. Plantation owners continued the attempt to blot out the slaves' identity. Slaves might not keep their African name. For example, in *Barracoon*, Kossola becomes Cudjo Lewis with the Meahers, his owners, though he refuses to be branded a new name: "My name, is not Cudjo Lewis. It is Kossula" (Hurstun; 2018; p. 19). His opposition seems justified, as accepting a new name is equivalent to accepting the fading of the first and welcoming the culture, the spirituality and the "new language" that go with it (Fanon; 2008; p. 61). Under normal settings, bearing a white man's new name may drive adherence to whiteness, though it may be difficult for a black man to be regarded as a white. Thus, the process of slaves' identity dispossession ends by imposing upon slave a new religion and spirituality. On plantations or in houses, the slave-owners used Christianity as a way of keeping slaves in their place. Some biblical passages promote the submissiveness of slaves towards their masters. Then, poor and disengaged slaves are granted rewards publicly and rebels are punished to death. In churches, passages of Paradise reward when they die are read to encourage obedience among slaves and progenies.

Ojebeta is an Ogbanje, and so that she may not die again, her father has paid a lot of money for a powerful dibia to ensure her protection. He puts on her cowries which ring everywhere she goes. Now, Ma Palagada, a Christian, can't always put up with this. The narrator reports: "Now, Ma Palagada thundered again at Chiago, 'take her away from my cloth-she will make it dirty. Take her to the blacksmiths' stall and let them file off all that junk she has tied all over her. Make sure you hold her tightly so that those stupid bells don't ring and those cowries make that pagan music.'" (Emecheta; 1977; p. 73) This protection she has had since birth is now regarded a pagan music and must be taken off unceremoniously.

Moreover, representing Ma Palagada as involved in slavery though she is Christian is ironical and morally unconceivable. Normally, the name Christian applies to someone who is and behaves like the Christ. That person has the Christ in him and by his side, so he cannot behave riskily against his other brothers and sisters whenever Christian or pagan themselves. He must be kind to everyone. Ma Palagada symbolizes the fakeness in some Christians as *The Bible* warns. We will elaborate this aspect later.

Apart from this, she also loses here human dignity. The narrator pursues: "She threw some pennies down on the mud floor for Chiago to pick up, which the latter did hurriedly, pulling Ojebeta like a dog behind her as they ran to the smiths' stalls." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 73) Chiago herself, an elder among the slaves, does not deserve receiving the money from Ma Palagada's hands. Pointless to talk of Ojebeta who is pulled over by Chiago on Ma Palagada's order. This expresses the loss of dignity. Another episode expressing slaves' loss of dignity is the following one:

The Chief wife of the master of the house had died, and it was necessary for her husband to send her to the land of the dead accompanied by a female slave. The one chosen was particularly beautiful slave with smooth skin and black closely cropped hair, who was said to be a princess captured in war from another Ibo village; she had made attempts to return to where she came from, but unfortunately, her new owner caught her and she lost her freedom of movement. On the eve of the burial she was brought and ordered to lie down in the shallow grave. As might be expected, she resisted, but there was no pity on the faces of the men who stood by watching, amused by her cries. She made appeals to the gods of her people to save her, she begged some of the mourners to spare her life, saying that her father, the chief of another village would repay them, but to no avail. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 63)

The loss of dignity here can be accounted for the fact that a girl slave has no right to life. Her master determines if she must live or die. So far, we have talked about slave girl's loss of identity and dignity. What about the hardships they undergo?

3.3 The working conditions of girl Slaves

The conditions under which girl slave work are rather hard and unspeakable as the narrator points out:

As soon as the first cock crowed, around five in the morning, a loud bell was sounded by the big male slave called Jienuaka. If by this time you were still asleep, a biting whip slashed round your body and you jumped up, and run like a wild animal let out of a cage, wriggling with pain. You could be the early age of four or mature slave of thirty, the same treatment applied. At the time Ojebeta went there she was seven. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 88)

The male slave himself submits to the first cock crow. Then, he immediately rings the loud bell. It sounds so hard that

from that time you can't keep sleeping on your mat. Finally, if ever you do, you are just severely and pitilessly slashed. Imagine such treatment to human beings whatever their age. Ojebeta learns her lesson out of experience. The narrator specifies that "She had soon learned to be up even before Jienuaka." Consider the little seven-year-old girl who wakes up so early without resting all through daytime without anyone knowing when they will ever go to bed. How do they spend the working day? The narrator continues: "They would all take their cans and rush to the stream to fetch the household water." (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 88-89) The expression "rush to" means that they go speedily. They behave so for fear of being severely reprimanded. They have no time for rest. It is they that fetch all the water the household must use. Then, they sell cloths (abada) all through the market. The narrator informs the reader:

Then they had proceeded home, balancing the piles of unsold cloth on their heads. The procession went in ascending order of age and rank, with the younger, immature slaves at the front so that they could not try to run away, and with their owner Ma Palagada bringing up the rear. Ojebeta was given four bundles of cloth to carry, one on top of the other. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 90.)

This shows that apart from fetching all the household's water they are also used for commercial activities, like selling cloths. Knowing that these slaves work unwillingly, they are organized in such a way that the younger ones may not try to evade. This procession is dehumanizing for the girl slave. And what is put on Ojebeta's head is obviously above her normal age capacity: four bundles of cloth. The narrator still continues to explain the girl slaves' hardships thus: "Ma was carrying a square case of something and the girls rushed forward eagerly to relieve her of it. Ijeoma was asked to take the bale of cloth from the sailor, and as the heavy bale was placed on her head, Ijeoma's neck shrank a little under the weight. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 111). This shows that their work is usually beyond their capacity. In the passage, the narrator speaks of 'the heavy bale' and the fact that 'Ijeoma's neck shrank a little under the weight'. It is not easy. Telling about Ojebeta who attends to Miss Victoria's children, the narrator reports:

The work was so copious and the demand so frequent that Ojebeta began to lose weight and was becoming apathetic... Ojebeta was by this time seeing stars. She was too stunned to cry, and in her instinctive attempt to protect her face from the slappings of the irate young woman, she let drop one of the children's China bowl which she had been holding. Of course the bowl broke into innumerable pieces, and this unleashed the very devil in Miss Victoria. She pounced on Ojebeta, hitting, pulling, spitting at her, and intermittently hissing: you good-for-nothing slave! You bush slave! (Emecheta; 1977; p. 119)

Look at how much the work weighs on Ojebeta and the savage, unthinkable degree of physical chastisement, doubled with the unqualifiable, dehumanizing language. The narrator somehow summarizes the tasks of girl slaves thus:

“Ma Palagada, although she bought slaves whom she expected to work hard to help her with her trade and with the running of her vast household (Emecheta; p. 91), they are regarded as lazy, improvident girls, good-for-nothing slaves. The narrator reports: “Pa turned round and bellowed, ‘clear out of here to your quarters, you good-for nothing slaves’ !” (Emecheta; 1977; p. 103). Similarly, as they are “bought girls” (Emecheta; p. 92), the master of the household as well as his sons dispose of them as they wish. About Pa Palagada, we read:

Chiago’s heart sank when she heard this, and the fact that Pa Palagada had insisted on her helping him to bed did not make things easier for her. Pa Palagada liked her, that much she know...He had insisted on her rubbing his back and cutting his nails, while he occasionally dipped his huge hands into her blouse. She had learned to stop protesting, to accept his attentions and be quiet about it all. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 96-97).

The use of the verb “like” is full of meaning. This is to say that Pa Palagada’s feeling for Chiago, their senior girl slave, is not love, but she is just a plaything for him. This sort of body desire is not new between master and slave. Masters think that they have the right to own the female slaves’ body as the latter are at their disposal. A kind of life and death power in the mouth of master authorizes them to abuse their female slaves sexually. For many enslaved, the regular and cruellest actions against their body are sexual abuses from their masters. Purposely, some masters during auctions bought young and well-developed female slaves to barter, to sell or to make of them their hidden mistresses as far as the transatlantic slave trade is concerned. When fine stature and good-looking young girls and women were put on sale in Alabama, South and North Carolina, Maryland or elsewhere, they found buyers instantaneously. Many black enslaved women had children with their white masters because of the regular sexual assaults. Chiago never complained about the exploitation of Ma Palagada as she thought there was no other way to escape it. Lord Frederick Lugard, the well-known colonial administrator in Nigeria, argued that authoritarianism was necessary to civilize Africans, even if its implementation led to the death of Africans. He wrote in 1915: “I do not regret the loss of life among aggressors, for these people hold life so cheap that the only way to prevent a recurrence of the outbreak is to make them understand that it will be severely dealt with.” Palagadas hold their slaves with extreme brutality which dissuades any retaliation and escape from slaves the way Lugard suggested above. If cruelty was not driven by a delusional colonial messianic complex, it was certainly moved by deliberate, callous attempts to keep slaves fully subservient and their personhood etiolated. Masters desired absolute control on the slaves’ mind, soul and body. Some slaves acknowledging that they could never win from the confrontation, pretended to accept their doom. Tyson (2006) refers to this attitude as “a patriarchal woman” who has internalized specific patterns of thought that approve of the dominance of males as appropriate. Some of these slaves, once pregnant, refused to carry it out to term and terminated it, committed infanticide and suicide on themselves. According to Brooten (2010, 295), “Sex was another powerful form of ensuring the authority of masters

over slaves” and that power was fully wielded to keep especially women slaves silenced and ashamed. That is why on plantations and in homes where slaves are kept, there are several instants of abuses. For example, in Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853, p. 135), this is what Solomon Northup declares:

Patsey walked under a cloud. If she uttered a word in opposition to her master’s will, the lash was resorted to at once to bring her to subjection. If she was not watchful when about her cabin, or when walking in the yard, a billet of wood or a broken bottle, perhaps, hurled from her mistress’ hand, would smite her unexpectedly in the face. The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life.

There is no legal marriage during enslavement. Masters do not allow that for fear of being opposed biblical passages on adultery. In the same way, Frederick Douglas says in his testimony entitled *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855, 16) that “There was a whisper that my master was my father; yet it was only a whisper, and I cannot say that I ever gave it credence”. This shows the stereotyped difference between white and black women, how slaver owners fathered children and how slave women would experience sin and shame due to sexual abuse by their masters. Sexual abuse was common from captivity places to masters’ houses and plantations and the victims enjoy no justice. The concept justice does not exist for slaves as their owner believe they are lesser beings. Masters needed more and more slaves without buying them. So, they got them bred by themselves or by other male slaves, the children stayed for a while in the house, if the mistress did not complain to have an opponent or another blood in her household. They were sold immediately in case of opposition with the mistress. All that is important is the financial outcome their sale procures.

Hence, Clifford, Ma Palagada’s son from another man comes back from Lagos. This is how the girl slaves behave on his arrival: “They trooped down to the River Nkisi and, as if the young man coming was going to inspect every crevice of their bodies, they all bathed thoroughly.” (Emecheta; 1977; p. 99) This implies that Clifford in his right of being Ma Palagada’s son, is free to choose whom he wants and she has no right of refusing. This does happen, since Clifford has feeling for Ojebela, who is not free in her will. It is a comment by two fellow slaves about it: “Now these two girls were talking of her being reserved for some horrible man who might slap her on both sides of her face if she protested. Protested against what?” (Emecheta; 1977; p. 98). One day he declares his intention to her: “You must not think of yourself as a slave like the other girls, you know. Because you may have to stay with me. would you like that? Mother would like it...Clifford smiled slightly again and nodded, still holding her now by the wrist. “Not just work for me, but to live with me. Or don’t you want me to make you my wife when you grow up, in a year of two?” (Emecheta; 1977; p. 123). This changes Clifford’s mind toward her. The narrator reports: “Clifford still thought of Ojebeta. He took it for granted that she would be his when he was ready for her.” (Emecheta; 1977; p. 126). To take for

granted mean there is no reasoning, no objection. He decides and she just has to accept. This is dehumanizing for her.

All those developments account for the girl slaves' predicament: hard work physical chastisement, moral/mental blows, sexual abuse, and unwanted marriage, just to quote these examples. The paradox is that Christianity is not unware of this. What then is the attitude of Christianity toward slavery?

4. Christianity and Slavery

4.1 Christianity, an instrument of colonization

When Christianity arrived in Africa, Africans already had their personhood in spirituality and religious celebrations. Yet, Europeans worked hard to refashion all these African beliefs. Christian missionaries' daily devotions were to destroy the existing beliefs and to replace them by a new one. Therefore, Christianity in Africa appears as an instrument of colonization. According to Dubois (1989, 5), Christianity is a double-edged tool in the colonized black body: "two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder". Their intention at arriving in Africa is to "civilize" Africans, thinking that they are brute, savage people. However, what they have created is a being swinging between his subjectivity of belonging to a whole community and feeling western. They introduced another self in the personhood of Africans by teaching them Christianity after having destroyed their spiritual beliefs. Christian missionaries display during biblical teachings that black people have not contributed to the holiness of Jesus, that why they have been enslaved and colonized.

Here, the narrator accounts for the reason why missionaries tread their feet on African soil, and we read: "So she became doubly rich. Seeing that conversion from nothing to Christianity brought Ma financial rewards, a number of smaller traders followed suit, and when the "nobodies" saw that the rich were all going to this new religion." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 107) Some expressions clearly open our eyes on the philosophy of Christianity. "Conversion from nothing to Christianity" means that nothing refers to those who are not Christians, who practice African traditional religions. The expression "the nobodies" also refers to non-Christian. This entails the fact that only Christians are something or important people in society. Another point is the notice for becoming a Christian, Mrs Simpson, a white woman, is the wife of the new United Africa Company chief. She helps run the local church Missionary Society School. She wants Ma Palagada to send some of her children there. The mindset at that time is to send to missionaries, not their own children, but their domestic slaves. Whichever side it turns, Mrs Simpson suggested a lot of things. This is the example of Ma Palagada: "More market stalls were assigned to Ma Palagada as an indirect result of this, and because of her connections she could buy any import at wholesale price before her rivals had time to do so. So, she became doubly rich." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 107). So Christianity is just an instrument of missionaries to sell their imported products. This enriches their church members. Because of this, Ma Palagada sends her girls slave to missionaries.

4.2 Christianity, a commercial organization in Africa

But while they enrich their faithful members, they have other means of getting part of this wealth as shown in the quotation below:

The girls were busier than ever as the first church harvest approached. Many of the successful people who had made a great deal of money from selling palm kernels instead of slaves were converted to some form of Christianity, which meant that they all wanted to wear some new outfit for the harvest festival. The girls were encouraged to work even harder by the expectation that they too would have something new to wear, for they knew that Ma Palagada liked to plan little surprise even for her lowliest servants. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 110).

The great lesson we can draw from this quotation is that the missionaries have come for their own interest. They sell palm kernels and other essential products to colonizers. Then they bring their best products as offering to God as thanksgiving. For this reason, Ma Palagada mobilizes her servants so as to gain more after. For sure, the missionaries have come for any interest except ours. However, it is worth noting that the result for missionaries are rather poor:

No one actually knew whether this type of display managed to bring many pagans to Christ; what was apparent was that in many Ibo towns the wealthy and successful people were usually members of the Church of England. The masses, on the other hand, tended to become Roman Catholics. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 111)

If the Anglican Church does not gain much through this trick, anyway the Roman Catholic Church, still a Christian church, encases a great number of faithful members. What is noticeable is that the true goal of missionaries is not spiritual but rather commercial. Today, in many African countries, Christians are seriously confronted to commercial aspects of church and its gospel as if they should pay before being prayed for and the more they pay, the more they are blessed. Yet, who bless after prayers? It is the pastor, the missionaries or God? Furthermore, churches love mundane items and preach for richness and materialism. Gospel and church commercialization have been subject to several investigations and criticism. Although the New Testament offers many metaphors for the church and the freedom it gives, some of its spokesmen still do not understand the personal sacrifice to make to reach the state of immaterialism. In the Old Testament, prophets like Amos, Micah, and Ezekiel have harshly criticised immoralities and corruption in the churches, yet these men of God still have the spirit of Judah which torment them. This is hypocrisy and the trend can also serve for explaining the attitude of Christianity toward slavery.

4.3 How Christianity sees Slavery

Christianity has not rejected slavery. The missionaries cooperate with slave owners and participate in their being more and more enslaved. Many saw no conflict between

keeping the faith and keeping or trading slaves. The Bible was often used to justify slavery. Yet, the relationship is not an easy one. It is important to realize the impact of religion in the agreements and disagreements about African bondage on plantations in the South of the United States of America, in the Caribbean and French dominions. What mainly brought war between the South and the North of America was tributary to the opposition made by some abolitionists to continue importing black people in some States. For instance, the narrator explains: "The amount of money the girls made for Ma from sewing alone was enough to keep the household going. In allowing her girls to go to Mrs Simpson's classes, she had allowed them to become elite slaves". (Emecheta; 1977; p. 109) By sending her servants to Mrs Simpson's classes, Ma Palagada makes enough money for her whole household. So, she overuses the already overused slaves to get more wealth. And whatever the situation, the girls remain slaves. The expression 'elite slaves' is an irony to show that whether just serving Ma Palagada, Mrs Simpson's courses in addition changes nothing in their status. An elite slave remains a slave, nothing more.

Christianity does worse. The narrator specifies the place reserved for slaves in their churches: "By the time Ojebeta and her fellow slaves and servants had taken their places at the back of the church, they were already tired." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 115) The question is this: does God make any difference between people? Astonishingly enough, the church clergymen who should put an end to this vile practice do accept it. If not, why should they ask slaves to sit down at the back of the church? This is how the narrator presents the religious service: "The Bishop took the gifts from them, blessed the labour of their hands, and told them to obey their masters and work diligently in all they were employed to do. And he begged God to accept the offerings of his subjects." (Emecheta; 1977; p.116) This is serious. The Bishop advises the slaves to be always submitted to their masters in all things. This shows the overt cooperation of clergymen in maintaining slavery. The narrator returns to a very important point. He says: "The slaves and servants, happy to have been blessed, walked back to their designated places at the back of the church away from their superiors, and sang more songs." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 116). This proves more than ever that the clergyman has set a difference between social classes in the church while the Bible teaches the opposite. The Bible says: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female." (Galatians chapter 3, verse 28). It can be deduced that the type of Christianity we know through colonization is rather abasing, dehumanizing to Africa. But it is noticed that Ojebeta manages to free herself from the Palagadas. How does this happen and what's its aftermath?

5. The Irony of Ojebeta's Freedom

5.1 Ojebeta's will of freedom: the favourable conditions

As Ma Palagada arranges the project of marriage between her son Clifford and Ojebeta, she dies. Miss Victoria, another child of Ma Palagada's, tries by violence to go back with Ojebeta, in vain. Although she has accepted the proposal of marriage with promises of prosperity, she prefers

a mushroom of freedom to that. The narrator lets us know her wish thus: "I wish I had a father who would now come and claim me, now that our kind Ma is gone. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 146) She thinks that freedom with poverty is better than slavery with wealth. When she thinks of "the caning, humiliation and dehumanization she had tasted in this household" (Emecheta; 1977; p. 144), nothing can prevent her from seeking freedom only. The decision of going back to Ibuza, her hometown, is clear now. So Amanna, a senior girl slave with whom she has always shared her pains, tells her the condition for leaving:

If your people really don't want you, you can come back, and maybe you would be allowed to work here for pay until you earn enough to give back all the money your brother took from Ma. For you know the curse that every slave bought is under, that you are never really free until you have repaid what was paid for you or until the actual person who bought you sets you free..(Emecheta; 1977; p. 150).

The way we know Ojebeta's family/background does not permit us to envisage her fulfilling such conditions. What will she do? She answers Amanna: "I know. That's why I am not secretly running away. I shall tell them all that in the big house and promise to pay them back one day. My bride price will be enough to do that because my brother told Ma to free me as soon as my future husband repaid her with my bride price." (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 150-151).

This is a paradox. Her brother Okolie sells her as a slave in order to finance his coming-in-age-dance. Now, if she wants freedom, she must wait for marriage, so that her suitor, knowing that she is a slave, uses her bride price for paying for her freedom. This is a mushroom of freedom indeed. How does she manage to leave the Palagadas?

5.2 Ojebeta's courage

It is noteworthy that her method of leaving the Palagadas is rather difficult. Amanna expresses her astonishment thus: "Amanna opened her eyes wide, and covered her mouth in astonishment. You want to tell them you are leaving? They won't let you." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 151) Meanwhile, Miss Victoria urges her to come with her basket so that they can go to Bonny. The narrator lets us discover her language, tone and tune through this passage: "When Miss Victoria saw her coming without her basket, she yelled: "Get your clothes basket, girl! Did my mother not buy you one? Come on, go and get it. Don't waste my time." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 152). This means that if she should ever follow her this will probably be a hellfire. Ojebeta goes back indeed and gets her basket, but instead of joining Miss Victoria, she prefers to speak frankly to Pa Palagada. The narrator reports:

Ojebeta breathed in deeply, then spoke. Pa Palagada, I want to go back to my people, now that Ma has gone. I thank you both for looking after me so well up to now. I don't want to go to Bonny with Miss Victoria. I can't even speak the Bonny language...her voice started to falter and she was near to tears. Are you sure there will be people in

your town who will look after you? Ojebeta held her breath to prevent herself from fainting. She had not expected this kind of response. Chiago gave her a congratulation look, as if to urge her on. It was a precious moment. She nodded vigorously. Yes, her people would look after her. Then there is nothing to be said. If you marry one of your people, make sure they return Ma's money to her son Clifford, because I think she wanted you for him. However, I don't think Clifford knows what he wants. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 152-153)

This is certainly her greatest ever known moment in life. His brother Okolie has abused her trust in him. She has been ill-treated by the Palagadas right from her childhood with them. She has tried in vain to escape in search for her brother. Her slavery is worsened when Clifford intends to marry her. Becoming the wife of your mistress as a bought slave means bondage for life. Now, after she has been so wickedly ill-treated by Miss Victoria, how can she accept to follow the latter after Ma Palagada's death? Her decision is audacious. We can sense it both through Amanna's question and Chiago's look. As Pa Palagada has probably no interest in keeping her, he reminds her of the condition and lets her go. How does she leave the house while Miss Victoria is waiting for her? We can see her courage even more clearly. The narrator reports her parting with Miss Victoria thus:

She thanked Pa, and quickly left the room, carrying her basket to the back yard to say a final farewell to her friends. But she walked into Miss Victoria, who this time was really irate.

How dare you keep me waiting? Don't you know we'll miss the ferry? She raised her right hand to strike as usual but Ojebeta used her clothes basket as a shield.

I am not going to Bonny with you! She shouted defiantly. I am going to my people. I am going home! Her heart was beating fast. Her eyes were round and shone with the first joy of freedom. I'm going home.

You can't go. We bought you. you'll be treated as a runaway slave. I will see to that. You must come with me. No, Miss Victoria, I will not come with you. I shall pay back every penny my brother borrowed from our mother who has gone, and I shall pay it back to Clifford. She wanted me for Clifford, not for you and Clifford is not here, so why should I go with you? Then why should you go to your people, since Clifford is not in? Miss Victoria retorted, cornering her. I'm going there to wait for him. When he wants me he will come for me. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 153-154)

We can hardly recognize Ojebeta. Miss Victoria herself must be flabbergasted. Where does she get all this strength, courage and wisdom from? That is resistance, rebellion, the only means for leaving bondage. In order not to be too much humiliated in front of this poor little girl slave from Ibuza she created a damage. The narrator reports:

Miss Victoria snatched the clothes basket from her. Give me back everything my mother gave you, you ungrateful slave!...It soon became apparent that what Victoria was searching for were the trinkets Ma had given Ojebeta. She took the earrings, the silver bangles and the chain...Then she fling back at her as she marched to her room. "If you want these silver trinkets back, you will have to come to Bonny to get them. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 154)

This is a tricky way of compelling Ojebeta to go to Bonny with her. Ma Palagada has given her the trinkets because there is a marriage project between her and Clifford. They are precious and pregnant with meaning. It means that Ma has accepted her into the family. She becomes one of the Palagada. Now, by taking them off, what will Ojebeta do? The narrator reports:

With hot tears of sadness burning her eyes she bundled the clothes back into the basket, quickly to avoid Chiago who was just coming out of Pa's room. She did not want to talk to anyone about this last humiliation. She could no longer bring herself to say goodbye properly to her friends, in the yard, and in her confused state, was forgetting the money she was to collect from Amanna. The latter realized what Ojebeta was about to do, and eagerly ran and caught up with her. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 155.

Miss Victoria humiliates Ojebeta indeed. More than a humiliation, it is an offense. Her mood prevents her from saying farewell to her friends and leave them in dignity. Worse still, she forgets collecting her money from Amanna. Fortunately. God is on her side, and Amanna herself rushes to her and hands it to her. But despite this humiliation and indignation, she keeps thinking she has made the best choice. This is what she tells Amanna when she reaches her with the money: "I don't really know why I'm crying, but believe me I would rather be a poor girl in Ibuza than a well-fed slave in this house without Ma." (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 155). She knows what she is doing and what she is driving at. For her, freedom from bondage with poverty is better than slavery in abundance. Who can imagine the little girl from Ibuza have such strong thought? Anyway, she bravely fights and gets her freedom. What happens after in Ibuza?

5.3 Ojebeta back to Ibuza

When Ojebeta returns to Ibuza, she finds neither of her brothers. She knows that she must face life by herself. So, with the savings she has realized, she trusts ten shillings to her aunt Uteh and starts a little trade with the remaining three shillings. She starts selling palm-oil and is able to take care of herself. Meanwhile she resumes going to the CMS church. Like other Ibuza girls, she is now proud of herself as she is no longer a slave. The narrator expresses her feelings as follows: "She was happy to be free, to enjoy her people, to watch her small savings grow, to go with her age-group and friends to the big market to select the abada material to buy for this celebration or that one." (Emecheta; 1977; p.

167) In this mood of freedom and personal development, she meets her future husband in the church.

Ogbanje Ojebeta Alice, now free, meets her husband. It is during one of their habitual Sunday services. This is how the pastor introduces the man: "Jacob Okonji...trained by Bishop. Onyaboh, the great bishop of the whole Niger, before going to work in Lagos." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 169) These are some comments by the narrator: "He was a good reader, an educated man... They call him Jacob the Whiterman because he behaves and acts mildly like a white man." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 169). Likewise, when Jacob pays Ojebeta a visit, he points out that she is "the only girl we have who can read in Ibo and do some very nice needlework. She is well trained" (Emecheta; 1977; p. 173). The narrator draws the conclusion through Ojebeta:

It suddenly seemed to Ojebeta that all her life she had been waiting for this person. He was so comforting, so reassuring. So this is how it is all going to end, she thought. Me marrying this civilized person, who even bothered to ask me if I like him, and me going to Lagos to see my two brothers, and then having a home of my own, all at once. She felt like crying at least to release the painful happiness, but she could not. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 173-74)

This is her final reaction: "Instead she nodded like a dumb person, trusting him completely. Yes, she would like to go with him, she would." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 174) The conclusion is drawn. They love each other and Ojebeta accepts Jacob's proposal to follow him to Lagos where he will settle the dowry without forgetting Uteh. There remains how to convince her into letting Ojebeta go right now. As a matter of fact, Uteh and her husband have not accepted the proposal. Uteh's husband says:

No...Ojebeta is not going to Lagos, not if I can prevent it. The poor girl has only been back in Ibuza two years. She still has to learn many of our ways, and then somebody in trousers instead of a loin cloth comes to snatch her away, right here under our very noses. No, she is not going. How do we know the man is not a wife beater how do we know he has no peculiar diseases? What do we know about him?(Emecheta; 1977; p. 174)

Ojebeta and Jacob know that it must be so. It is essentially a village and traditional mentality. The elders usually inquire about the man their daughter wants to marry and vice versa and if necessary, they are entitled to stop the process. Ojebeta and Jacob think they will see things otherwise. They arrange and achieve their departure, which the narrator reports thus:

Do you know, I've been to the stall that Ojebeta was fond of occupying my and she isn't there. I don't even know if she sold her tin of palm oil. I asked her customer from the east if Ojebeta had sold him her palm oil and he told me he had waited the whole day for her and because she hadn't turned up he had to bring the oil from another girl. In fact

he was packing and getting ready to go back to Otu when I saw him. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 179-180)

This notice shows that Ojebeta is no longer in Ibuza or she is preparing to leave. The narrator reports: "But Uteh was worrying, and not simply worrying; she was taking steps to get Ojebeta back". (Emecheta; 1977; p. 180) Indeed:

It was when they had been fully refreshed by the night's sleep that a messenger from the local post office came to their wagon asking for a certain Alice Ojebeta. Instinctively, Ojebeta wanted to answer to her name, but so deep was the trust and respect she had for this man Jacob that when he signaled to her with his eyes to be silent she complied without question. When no one responded, the messenger went running to the next mummy-wagon to continue the search for an Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta who had to be called back home to Ibuza...

Uteh's attempt proves vain. This escape is unheard of. In fact Uteh is attempting to give Ojebeta to a cousin who is well instructed of their customs. Uteh and her husband are not used to such behavior. They are normally preparing to find a husband who respects the customs of Ibuza. Ojebeta escapes them. Henceforth we'll see her in Lagos as Jacob's wife. But Jacob has not arrived to steal Ojebeta from her big mother Uteh. After leading her to Lagos he succeeds in negotiating with Ojebeta's family. The narrator specifies. "After many months of arguments, discussions and negotiations with her family, Jacob's wishes did indeed come true. He married Ojebeta, and she becomes his wife and took the extra title of Mrs Okonji, which her people translated to 'Misisi'. (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 182-183).

This means she is sincere in her escape, and Jacob does not behave as a disrespectful young boy. Now Ojebeta's name is "Mrs Ogbanje Ojebeta Alice Okonji, the daughter of Okwekwu Oda. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 183)

5.4 The paradox of Ojebeta's freedom

We remember that Ojebeta's brother, Okolie, has sold her to Ma Palagada. The condition for her to be free is that she may marry someone who can pay back the eight pounds to the Palagadas. Now, all this episode of Ojebeta being a slave in the Palagadas' house is unknown to Jacob. The matter remains hidden for some time until Okolie finally confesses it. The narrator says: "One thing still worried them. Okolie had finally confessed that he had actually sold his sister for eight pounds, and that according to the custom she remained legally Palagada property." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 184) This must be a source of worry for Jacob. But in actual fact he has got married hastily. He just arrives at Ibuza, and through the church comes across Ojebeta the same day. He arranges everything and goes back to Lagos with her before coming back to negotiate the marriage. Everything happens in a record time. There should be no marriage without proper preparation. So, he himself is probably partly responsible for

the effects of this confession by Okolie. Ojebeta herself has no interest in unfolding such a fact, lest it should prevent her from marrying Jacob. The narrator specifies: "This realization was painful to Jacob, and he knew that that debt must be paid somehow, for their own peace of mind. It was not the kind of thing one wanted other people to know about: one had to do it under cover, because it was a shameful thing. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 184). The other downside of this matter is that Okolie has not informed Owezim. The narrator says "Owezim had reprimanded and remonstrated with his younger brother Okolie in a profusion of bad language, perhaps beginning somewhat to blame himself for having left home so early." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 184). It is unthinkable that Okolie does not inform Owezim up to now. Owezim's language unveils something: while Owezim is virtuous, Okolie is vicious. And weight lays now on Jacob. The narrator reports: "But despite the recrimination the harm had already been done. Jacob had not known the full truth until after the wedding; neither had Owezim been quite aware that Ojebeta's stay at Otu was the result of this precise financial transaction." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 184). It becomes a very difficult situation since everything has been done for the situation to happen that way. Jacob sees that it is not a plot by his two brothers-in-law. Owezim is unaware of how to proceed. The narrator reports: "For the time being they all decided to keep quiet about the situation, until it could be respectably resolved, and they prayed that in the meantime nothing untoward would happen." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 184) As years roll by, Pa Palagada reminds Clifford of the eight pounds Ojebeta owes then, and Clifford takes this message seriously. The narrator reports: "It was on one of his home leaves that he traced Ojebeta to Lagos, and at once he sent a message there that he would be coming to see them. Without more being said, it was understood by all that he was coming for his money." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 185-186) Owezim is unaware of the matter. Okolie misuses the money. Jacob is innocent. Ojebeta thirsts after freedom. Clifford is in his right of having back the money. The only faulty one here is Okolie. It is his responsibility. The narrator reports: "Okolie pleaded with Jacob, saying that he had spent the eight pounds many years before and was not in a position to refund it." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 16) This means he cannot face this refunding. The narrator pursues:

Owezim, with so many family burdens of his own, was just not able to afford the amount, though he felt sorry for Jacob since he had already parted with the required bride price. Both the brothers-in-law were apologetic and sympathetic. However the message was clear to Jacob. Ojebeta was his wife, the children that were dying were his, so if he wanted to have things running smoothly within his own household, he would now have to pay for it. (Emecheta; 1977; p. 186)

It is a tragic situation befalling Jacob. Basically, Ojebeta's parents die while she is still very young. Then Owezim, her eldest brother, goes quickly to Lagos and forgets about Ibuza. Hence, Okolie finds an open ground to dispose of Ojebeta as a plaything just as a means of achieving his goals. He plays trick with her and secretly gets the price of her value for his selfish purpose of come-in dance. Ojebeta reluctantly becomes the slave of the Palagadas. As she finds

an opportunity, she braves the authority and forces her coming back to Ibuza while Pa Palagada tells her she will pay back the price of her slavery. She plans to get the money from her dowry, which she doesn't actually do. Being unaware of the whole episode, Jacob pays the bride price before the situation emerges. His little mistake is that he has hastened the marriage; he has not taken sufficient time to enquire about Ojebeta's background. The hammer falls upon his head and this does not truly satisfy Ojebeta's dream. Jacob finally decides and pays back the eight pounds to Clifford who feels pity for her. But the narrator analyses: "She was satisfied to belong to a man like Jacob, a fellow townsman, one who would never call her a slave, and who gave her a real home even if it was only one room that served for sitting, eating, sleeping and everything else. She would rather have this than be slave in a big house in Onitsha." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 187)

This is all the more important as it is an expression of Ojebeta's satisfaction as Jacob's wife and slave. The mood shows that Jacob is poor since their abode is an only room piece; but she prefers peace of mind in poverty with a kinsman from her own village to wine and meat where she is not given respect and dignity feasting with strife. It is written in the Bible: "Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife (Proverbs chapter 17 verse 1). Although her situation is tragic because she frees herself from slavery to become the slave of a new master, her satisfaction proves that she lives and will live in peace and joy as Jacob's wife. The narrator concludes: "The contract is completed, after all these years. I feel free in belonging to a new master from my own town Ibuza, my mind is now at rest." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 189) Her tragic fate is that after becoming unwillingly the slave of the Palagadas, her bravery of leaving the latter leads her under another master. The narrator expresses Jacob's contempt as follows: "She placed the bowls of food on a small table that had been hastily pushed into the centre of the one-room apartment. Then she walked round to where Jacob was sitting feeling very important and expansive, and she knelt down in front of him." (Emecheta; 1977; pp. 189-190). His feeling very important and expansive proves that apart from being her husband, he becomes also her master. She has bought her indeed by being the one who pays for the price of her freedom. This is indeed a fake freedom, and the narrator reports: "Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master." (Emecheta; 1977; p. 190)

In the novel under study, the heroine is used as a symbolic representation of the African woman whose life is full of domination and exploitation, especially, in family, society, and even marital relationships. This goes in the same line of thought with what Mazrui (1993) refers to as the double oppression of the African woman as a female as well as a Black body. Ojebeta has never dreamed of fighting for freedom from the Palagadas and finally she has a new "better" master, her husband. It is her tragic fate, and she represents all Ibuza women, as she says: "Was the glory of a woman not a man, as the Ibuza people said?" (Emecheta; 1977; p. 190). This common attitude maintains her in slavery. In actual fact, an Ibuza woman is never free as it is commonly said: "No woman is ever free. To be owned by a

man is a great honor. So perhaps in a sense your brother was not too much in the wrong” (p. 166).

It has been noticed that slavery does exist in Africa after the official abolition of slave trade. People sell some categories of boys and girls as slaves to other villages/towns/tribes. But we can notice that Ojebeta’s case is rather tragic. After losing her father and mother as a result of the German-Britain war and influenza respectively, her eldest brother Owezim quickly goes to Lagos and forgets about them. Okolie, her remaining senior brother, a lazy boy, decides to sell her to their aunt Ma Palagada for eight pounds, so as to pay for his coming-to-age dance. Ojebeta becomes a slave, a property of the Palagadas, who rightfully reserve her as their son Clifford’s wife after harshly and savagely ill-treating her in the same way as all her fellow girl slaves. She succeeds in freeing herself from them after Ma Palagada’s death and returns to Ibuza where she finds a husband, Jacob. The latter pays all the bride-price before discovering that she is a property of the Palagadas and now pays the value of her freedom to Clifford.

This mindset is inherited from the Ibuza culture according to which a woman is never free. Africans are as responsible as the Europeans for the doom resulting from the slave trade. Thus, Africans, especially the womenfolk, should fight with determination to free themselves from such olden yokes.

6. Conclusion

The present slave narrative sheds light on the domestic phenomenon that has deprived some African villages from their able-bodied and the extent to which some Africans have taken an active part in the business. However, before Europeans could set foot in Africa to launch slave trade to that large scale, Africans were already practising that shameful business by selling men and women to rich people of other villages. In this way, Ojebeta becomes slave in the house of Ma Palagada for eight pounds because of Okolie. As instruments to keep slaves silent and completely obedient towards any command zombies-like, slaves-owners used extreme brutality and Christianity. The former spirituality of the slaves is then discharged and destroyed. Ma Palagada and her husband make much money out of their slaves’ hard labors in severe exploitation. This represents, according to Mazrui (1993), the notion of “malignant sexism”, a term he used to represent the “economic manipulation, sexual exploitation, and political marginalization” of women (Mazrui, 1993, p. 92).

Mindful to all these inequalities in African societies, Emecheta writes to raise consciousness about it. Her writing also calls the attention of readers on the sexual exploitation, violence and racialization of Black African women as a process of their body dehumanization. African women’s enslavement is in fact related to her second-class citizenship belief pertaining to what de Beauvoir describes in her book *The Second Sex* (1949). Consequently, to move from the margin and free herself from slavery trauma, she has to dare to fight back, “I would rather be a poor girl in Ibuza than a well-fed slave in this house without Ma. So I should be really happy.” (Emecheta; 1977; 150). Ojebeta finds relief in her new family and becomes autonomous: “In her way,

Ojebeta was content and did not want more of life; she was happy in her husband” (Emecheta 178). The will power of Ojebeta to be free corroborates Sankara’s assertion about slavery and slave: “There is no need complaining for a slave unable to fight for his freedom”¹. There is now Africans with double personality, one accepting Christianity as their religion and another going back to their spiritual roots clandestinely. But, in our opinion, the nature of African personhood in the future will not be determined by the opposition between the two forces, but by their combination. Captives will one day free themselves the way Ojebeta does.

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¹ L’esclave qui n’est pas capable d’assumer sa révolte ne mérite pas que l’on s’apitoie sur son sort.

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