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Editorial

Ethnicity is a universal human phenomenon which manifest itself in several forms and contexts and is variegated by the nexus of time and space. It encapsulates such terms that make possible the imagining of 'self' and 'other' within the praxis of cultural experience and difference. The imagination it breeds plays itself out in varying degrees of consensus and/or conflict, which in turn (re)create or (re)inforce the conditions of ethnic existence among human beings.

In this issue of the journal, several contributors have attempted to situate the subject, both as concept and social condition, within the ambience of different African experiences. The attempt is significant because the character of ethnicity even within Africa itself (either as it relates to intra- and inter-group relations, or to the question of the play of identities within the framework of local and national politics) is shift from one community to the other. Furthermore, it is standard practice to hear intellectuals and statesmen all over the continent admonish Africans to shun ethnicity and live as one people. Yet ethnicity is one ubiquitous category of human thought and transaction, which has for several centuries, largely determined and continues to determine the nature and substance of African development.

The contributors, therefore, provide a largely multidisciplinary approach in their exploration of the subject. They also take on a wide range of ethnic experiences which touch on such grades of racial difference as African versus non-African, black versus non-black, etc. Issues that are examined relate ethnicity to such social conditions as democracy, economic advancement, gender, language, minority existence, and the question of an African renaissance, among others. Against the background of historical and contemporary experiences, ethnicity is portrayed as a social constant which cannot be erased from the map of development in Africa, as in elsewhere.

Thus, an overall socio- political and economic development in the continent is envisaged through such practices that encapsulate principles of political correctness and such a management of differences that would produce the highest degree of consensus in human and inter-group relations.

- Uduopegema Joseph Yakubu

Setting the Prisoners Free: Buchi Emecheta's Strategy for the Emancipation of Women in the Traditional African Family

Osita C. Ezewanebe

Emecheta's two novels, *Second Class Citizen* (1994) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) depict her anger against the traditional Igbo family and her position on women's status in society. Her anger reaches its peak in the crisis that eventually shatters the traditional family setting in the novels. She seems to be convinced that no form of equality or freedom will be achieved by women under such a traditional system. Hence, her determination to dispense with it for the purpose of the liberation of the numerous women trapped within it.

The two novels contain more than enough illustrations to make one angry at the way women are subordinated, oppressed and marginalized in the Igbo society. They present families that give no hope of freedom to any female born and bred in it. The women's lives are a continuum of subjugation from the father's house to the husband's house. In the *Joys of Motherhood*, the men are gods and lords with numerous women as wives, concubines, daughters and slaves, attending to their needs. One such 'god' is Nwokocho Agbadi, a man equal in valour and wealth to Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* before his exile. Agbadi, a wealthy local chief, a great wrestler and a warrior, owns many 'properties' including 'seven wives' (whether freeborn or slave makes no difference), large farms, barns and livestock. 'He ruled his family as if he were a god'. That is what he is, at least, to his wives and daughters, though excluding his mistress. His sexual power and its expression are as unchecked and unquestionable as his orders. All the wives often do is to watch the dangling 'fiend' and wish it tied to their beds. The sexually starved wives always grumbled behind him, while waiting patiently for their turn. The older wives envy the younger ones who are still productive, because the need to add another child to those swarming in the compound might turn the majestic penis to their (younger wives) huts. Agbadi goes about town having a nice time with his mistress, Ona, while his wives stand in awe of him.

The conditions of the daughters are not different from those of the wives. They are brought up to follow the footsteps of their mothers as 'obedient' wives. Obi Idayi depicts

elements of gender relations while responding to the children's greeting in Agbadi's compound: 'My sons', he said, 'you will grow to be kings among men. My daughters, you will all grow to rock your children's children' (37). Hence the societal expectation for women is to attain motherhood through marriage and childbearing. Manhood is presented in the novel as being synonymous with ambition, bravery or valour, dignity spiced with arrogance, commanding posture, hardwork, immense sexual power, suppression of emotional feelings, provision of food and shelter and the enforcement of discipline in the family.

On the other hand, womanhood is tied to morality, childbearing and child-rearing, complete dependence both sexually and financially, lack of ambition, and 'obedience'. A 'complete woman' is one who possesses these qualities and has attained the peak of womanhood - motherhood through marriage and childbearing. Nnu Ego (Twenty bags of cowries), Nwokocho Agbadi's daughter, is the symbol of a complete woman. As a daughter, she is subordinated to the male children and is nurtured into adulthood with the values that make a 'good mother'. She imbibes all the traditional values with which she is fed.

Her marriage, first with Amatokwu and later with Nnaife Owulun, is contracted without regard for her opinion. It was some days after the proposal, and after arrangements had been made that Agbadi informs her. The choice of whom Nnuego marries is purely her father's. Agbadi announces the news of her daughters' suitor to his friend, Idayi: 'I have promised Amatokwu that I will think about his son' (38). Nnu Ego is neither educated nor trained. She is a rural village girl who dances to and depends wholly on the demands of the society. She is without any ambition, except that which the society sets for women, that is to have children which one can call her own, and who can look after one in one's old age.

Adah Ofili, the female protagonist in Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* is equally oppressed both as a daughter and as a wife. Unlike Nnu Ego who was born and brought up in a village, Adah's family is urban and middle-class. Adah was born and brought up in Lagos. Her mother, Ma, is like the wives of Nwokocho Agbadi. She is under the strong command of her husband who had her arrested and tortured by the police for child neglect when Adah ran away from the house. Unlike Nnu Ego who is a cherished daughter of her father's mistress, Adah was born into the family when everyone was awaiting the birth of a son. She was thus unwelcome. Though her family is an urban one, it is no less conservative and oppressive to women. For Emecheta, it does not matter whether the family is an urban or a rural one; the lives of women is that of subordination. The difference between Adah and Nnu Ego is that the former is more ambitious and that may not be unconnected with the urban environment in which she finds herself.

Adah's life as a wife is one of constant struggle against oppression and exploitation. Emecheta's anger against the traditional Igbo family is therefore justified. She detests the system where women are owned as any other property, a structure that traps and

enslaves women, an environment that forces women into subservience, regardless of their achievements and potential just because they are women. She, therefore, maps out strategies to free women trapped in such situations. Emecheta posits that the traditional family cannot breed the type of women needed to break the chains of slavery that hang on the woman's neck. Thus she tears the traditional family apart, either through death or by denying it what it perceives as its essence. In other instances, she loads it with problems causing it to break up under the weight of its own crisis. Whichever one it is, the important thing is her determination to set its victims free.

Emecheta attacks the traditional family most aggressively in her depiction of Nnu Ego. First, Nnu Ego is presented as a proud exemplar of traditional womanhood. She believes in tradition, lives in it, works for it and hopes in it. She is a good example of women whom Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie referred to as 'the married women incorporated': women who are afraid to upset the status quo, who want security through men, who cling to the vanishing respectability of being married and of having children.¹ In her miseries, she hangs her hope on her children and consoles herself with the notion that a married mother of noble sons and daughters has a bright future and thus can endure everything for their sake. This view immobilizes her from seeking complete freedom.

She was given out as a wife at a very tender age. Her 'love' for Amatokwu, her first husband, is based on the Ibuza concept of manhood and not on any personal conviction that the man will satisfy her personal desires and aspirations in marriage.

The novelist deliberately fills her to the brim with traditional values in order to burst her with them, to turn the table against her and thus shock other such women into the realization that things do not often work out as planned. For Amatokwu, Nnu Ego is only a wife who is in his compound to satisfy his sexual desires and to give him worthy sons and daughters. After all, their marriage was contracted by their families. Though they seem happy with each other, Emecheta could not afford to see their 'love' flourish at the expense of the woman.

Many feminists have emphasized the fact that some women are their own obstacles in the struggle for their liberation. This is often reflected by rural women (and some urban ones) who have been so oppressed over the years, and the oppression has been so internalized that they (women) have succumbed to it as their fate. They take their oppressed condition as normal, see themselves as helpless, and seek for fulfilment and succour within the oppressive structure. Emecheta shows her disapproval of the oppressive family structure by denying it children, which it sees as the essence of its establishment. Had Nnu Ego had children immediately she entered Amataokwu's family, the ugly side of the insincere love would not have been exposed. The barrenness brought out the oppressive view of the role of a woman as wife in a traditional family - an object which the man uses to ensure the immortality of his lineage. The problem of barrenness destroys the 'closeness' and 'love' between Amatokwu and Nnu Ego. The novelist does not believe that the essence of setting up a family is solely to have

children. Moreover, children born within such an oppressive system would have ensured the continuity of women's subjugation and enslavement. For Emecheta, such a structure is inadequate for rearing the children needed to shake and transform it. Since the family fails to realize its essence, it breaks up on its own, and Nnu Ego is released to try her fortune elsewhere.

Polygamy makes barrenness to be seen as women's problem. Nnu Ego ignorantly accepts it as her own fate:

After a while, Nnu Ego could not voice her doubts and worries to her husband any more. It had become her problem and hers alone. How could anyone have made Nnu Ego believe that she is still a full woman even without children. For her, she is a failed woman; she has failed her husbands, her husbands people, her own father's people and the society as a whole. (40).

It is Nnu Ego who has failed, not her husband. He even tells her, 'I am sorry, Nnu Ego, but I cannot fail my people' (41). He marries another wife who gave him sons. Emecheta allows Nnu Ego's marriage to break up while she was trying to satisfy the society that sets it up, thereby exposing its (the society's) inadequacies. Since people marry to have children, barrenness is therefore seen as a failure of marriage, and the barren woman, a failed person.

The couples have children not because they want to but because society expects them to. Emecheta makes Ona, Nnu Ego's mother, die while trying to satisfy her father's and by implication, society's demand for children from her father's lineage. At her death, she leaves a warning to which neither Nnu Ego nor her people take heed: 'To allow Nnu Ego be a woman; that is to allow her be free to choose what she wants in life; to have a life of her own; a husband if she wants one; a child if she wants' (36). For her, this is what it is to be a woman; to have the freedom to choose, not to dance to the tune of the society and satisfy the desire imposed by the society.

In Nnu Ego's second marriage, Emecheta decides to take her away from her people to a new environment, an urban environment with different views about manhood. Nnu Ego has not learnt her lesson. Her second marriage was also contracted. The man in question is even in Lagos while his brother performs the marriage rites and takes her to Lagos to meet her husband. The weary journey to Lagos signifies a shift in time, place and values regarding gender roles, manhood and various forms of filial relationship.

Her first reaction to her husband; his home and job is unsavoury. Physically, he is a negation of her ideal man; a strong Ibuza man, trimmed and shaped by his hard work on the farm. The man she meets standing in front of her is wholly different:

a mountain of flesh; a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling first this side and then to that. The belly coupled with the fact that he was short, made him

look like a barrel. His cheeks were puffy and looked as if he had pieces of hot yam inside them, and they seemed to have pushed his mouth into smaller size above his weak jaw (54).

Added to this ugliness is what Nnu Ego sees as his 'woman's job' - a washerman, a man who washes another man's clothes and worse still, women's under-cloths. For her, it is a job for 'ignobles' like women because it degrades the dignity of manhood as she knows it. In as much as she has accepted the subjugation of woman to man, she cannot understand or believe the fact that a man can be so docile as to accept a job which subjugates him to another man. She is unable to understand the redefinition of manhood brought about by colonization and urbanization. Worse still, for Nnaife Owulum to be happy doing such a job shows he has accepted a subservient position that robs him of his manhood and places him on the same footing with her: 'how could a situation rob a man of his manhood? She asked.... I want to live with a man, not a woman-made man!' (64).

The 'new' manhood Nnu Ego finds in her husband makes her have a low opinion of him. However, since she has come to believe that marriage is aimed at having children, she accepts him as one of the inevitable fingers of fate. Hence her yearning to satisfy her family, and the society still makes her to disregard her own desires. She is tied to Nnaife by her traditional belief regarding the family and the role of women as wives. The new demand of the urban environment has destroyed the ignorant and childish love that existed between her and Amatokwu before barrenness exposes their inadequacy.

The new economic order enslaves man and wife and sets them apart from the physical closeness they once shared in the rural system. In the Ibuza of Nnu Ego's youth, man and wife work together on the farm and somehow shared the financial responsibility of the home. In Lagos, Nnu Ego is both physically and emotionally separated from Nnaife. It is either the man is very wealthy and takes sole financial responsibility for the home while the wife stays at home and rears children, or the husband is not wealthy and of necessity, pushes the wife to take care of or contribute significantly to the upkeep of the family. Yet in both conditions, women are regarded as subordinates. The difference in roles has no effect on the status of women as wives. Nnu Ego and her likes see this new economic role as a further erosion of manhood. Cordelia, the wife of Ubani the white man's cook, drives the message home to Nnu Ego when she says:

Men here are too busy being white man's servants to be men. We women mind the home. Not our husband. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is the money, skinning white man's money (66).

The men see nothing wrong in the new definition of manhood - a man who depends

on another man for his finance, works for him and takes orders from him, a man subordinated to another man or even woman for money! At least, their subordination is to another man or even woman, but not their wives. They see nothing wrong in that in as much as it does not affect the gender roles of man and wife. Nnaife is very devoted to his job and derives satisfaction from it. He does not believe it has robbed him of his manhood. For him, it is only another source of income for the maintenance of his family. He even accepts, grudgingly though, Nnu Ego's petty trading so far as she can combine it with her roles as wife and the income is used for his family.

What never changes is his views about who a wife is and her duties as mapped out for her by the traditional society. Everything can change but not that. He, like the other Igbo men in the novel is not ready to compromise that. The new definition of manhood has nothing to do in that regard. For him, whether Nnu Ego stays at home or engages in petty trading and shares the financial responsibility of the home, or even takes full care of the needs of the family, she is nothing but his property. He bought her at a very high price hence her life must be lived as dictated by him. He makes this clear to her when he says:

Did I not pay your bride prize?

Am I not your owner ... if you are going to be my wife, your 'must' accept my work, my way of life. I will not have it any other way. You 'must' understand that (62).

Ubani, his friend and colleague, reiterates this view when in response to Nnaife's bemoaning of his wife's hateful feelings towards him, he reminds him that husband/wife relationship is not one of emotions but of strict roles described along gender lines: 'You are to give her children and food' Ubani said: 'She is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them' (90). For Ubani, what is important is that each party fulfils his or her roles: the public life for the man; the private life for the wife.

Emecheta is fed up with men like Nnaife who could willingly accept changes for themselves, changes that ease their means of income; changes even in the economic activities of their wives in so far as such make life comfortable for the family. These are men who abhor changes either in themselves or in their wives where such would improve the status of their wives. She registers her displeasure by a terrible delineation of Nnaife's physical appearance, an appearance that points to his conservative and oppressive views about women as wives and daughters. He is represented as being short (physically and intellectually), unimaginative, clumsy, thoughtless and lazy. He is a man whose progress is seen in his massive size, but with a brain so small that he is incapable of managing or organizing his home. His excellence is shown in his sexual exploits which is manifested in having numerous children and marrying endless wives without even minding whether there is space for them to place their feet in his house. His reaction when his wives serves him lunch shows his animalistic, and unreasonable tendency:

'Don't I sleep with you?' He bellowed. 'What else do you want?'

For him, the theory of new wine in new wineskin has no meaning in the relationship between man and wife. He brings in his old traditional concept of the relationship between husband and wife into the changing gender environment. Hence, forgetting that he is not in the rural compound where there are enough spaces for as many wives as he wants, he goes on to practise polygamy in a small room. The wineskin must certainly burst, and it is Nnaife who first gives way. His unwillingness to accept changes that call for a redefinition of the idea of woman and enhance the status and dignity of the wife lead to his bitter end. Ironically, it is his defence of the traditional values he cherishes in women that sends him to prison. Emecheta can hardly allow such a family that has succeeded in caging women as wives to continue in the oppression of the daughters. The daughters have a new vision of life, which they must be allowed to lead even if it means getting Nnaife out of the way.

Though Nnu Ego is strong enough to sustain the family in the absence of her husband, she does not grow in her views about her role as a wife. She holds tenaciously to the old views, which place value on a women based on her ability to have children, male especially. The writer turns the table against Nnu Ego by making her die neglected and lonely, while the children she has used her life and wealth to train and who had abandoned her in the cause of their own personal pursuits, only returned home after her death to perform an extravagant funeral ceremony.

Nnu Ego is presented as a symbol of the tragedy of belief in the sanctity of such traditional values as the roles of women as wives. Despite her ugly experiences, she fails to seek positive change and is thus made to give way like the unrepentant men. She is certainly not the kind of woman needed to set the pace for women liberation.

In Adah Ofili of *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta sets out to mould through the character of Adah Ofili, the kind of woman needed to bring about change in the status of women as wives. Since the movement from rural to urban environment could not help Nnu Ego out - grow the traditional views imposed on her by society, the writer makes Adah start her life in an urban environment (Lagos) and end it in the United Kingdom. Adah's family lives in Lagos. His father works in Lagos and earns salary, unlike Nnu Ego's father who is a farmer and a local village Chief. Yet Adah's father, like Nnaife, is a man with conservative views about women as wives, daughters and mothers. Ma, his wife, is a full-time house wife who cooks and takes care of the home. Unlike Nnu Ego who is pampered by her father, Emecheta gives Adah a bitter childhood. The novelist seems to imply that it is the way Nnu Ego was treated in her family that made it impossible for her to free herself from conservative ideals, in spite of the reality of socio-economic changes. She decides, therefore, to distance Adah from such a pampering family so that she will be able to criticize and work against it. It also seems that the pampering of Nnu Ego by the patriarchal family denied her the moral strength to see anything wrong in it. Nnu Ego is a cherished daughter of Nwokocha Agbadi. She reminds him of his love

exploits with her mother, Ona. The patriarchal family did not pamper Adah in any way. She had rough and difficult childhood experiences. 'She was a girl who had arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy' (1). Her birth was seen as a disappointment. She experiences the oppression of the girl child early in life, being subordinated to her younger brother, Boy. She is made to take Boy to school every morning, while she herself is denied the same opportunity.

Unlike Nnu Ego who does not only accept but also upholds the 'female essence',² the ambitious Adah Ofili refuses to be subdued; she refuses to accept the inferior position into which the society tries to force her. 'Whenever she took Boy to Ladi - Lak Institute' we are told, 'she would stand by the gate and watch all her friends lining up by the school wall in their smart, navy blue pinafores, looking clean and orderly. She would stand there filled with envy and this envy later gave way to frustration, which she showed in many small ways' (3). The internalized anger, as a child, fuelled her determination to live a free life. Early in life, she strongly objected to Ma's tactful hints on a subjugating marriage where a girl is made wholly dependent on a man whom she serves and worships. She decides that:

She would never, never in her life get married to any man, rich or poor, to whom she would have to serve his food on bended knee. She would not consent to live with a husband whom she would have to treat as a master and refer to as 'sir' even behind his back. She knew that all Igbo women did this, but she wasn't going to...
(14)

Adah's marriage to Francis, the man of her choice, does not better her status in the society. Her husband is not different from her father. She is forced into a subservient and inferior position by her husband, in spite of her economic independence. Several oppressive forces emerge from the husband's family. Francis' parents try to dictate their life for them. When Emecheta realizes that it is becoming impossible for Adah to free herself, she takes the nuclear family away to a foreign land, away from the reach of the extended family.

Yet, the supposedly developed society of America does not change Francis. Adah's life becomes even worse than that of a slave. The family suffers as blacks in country of 'whites', and Adah suffers as a woman in a man's world. Despite the fact that she sustains the family with her own sweat, she is forced to play the 'obedient' wife, dancing to the tune of the patriarchal environment. Francis is not ready to accept any change from what the society expects of a wife. Though he willingly accepts Adah to play the role of the breadwinner, he is not interested in how she manages to do that, nor does he support Adah to embark on practices that will increase her efficiency. Instead, her views, feelings and desires are relegated to the background. 'Hadh't Francis decided that the six pounds they would give her if she had the child at home would be useful'

(107). He does not consider so much whether she survives or not after all, where he comes from, people deliver in the farm.

Francis disregards Adah's psychological and emotional wellbeing while holding tenaciously to her wealth. She is happy as a wife only if her money keeps everybody in the family going. Francis takes Adah as well as her wealth as his property. Moreover, she is not to be found wanting in her roles as mother and wife. Thus, like Nnaife, Francis is willing to accept changes that make his life more meaningful and comfortable, but unwilling to allow such for his wife. He understands why Adah should work hard and earn salary (he even resents her staying at home), but he refuses to understand why she should use the reward of her sweat her own way. Though Adah works hard the money she earns is used for her enslavement, she hands her pay packet over to Francis who gives her two pounds for home-keeping. He becomes furious when ever Adah uses contraceptives for family planning (to enable her pursue her career, which means more money for the family). He insists that such is made for harlots and single girls, not married women. When he feels that Adah is bent on having it her own way, he resorts to brutality and batters Adah repeatedly.

At this point, Emecheta seems to give up all hope on the liberation of married women within the patriarchal family. She has tried to explore ways of liberating Igbo women, especially wives. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, she had removed Nnu Ego from the rural environment where she had been contented and happy in her ignorance and oppression. At least the novelist could endure that, realizing that she is uninformed, illiterate and unexposed. She (Nnu Ego) might not even be aware that she is being oppressed, considering the way her father 'loves' her. She takes it as normal life. Even when she is brought face to face with the changes of modern society, she has so internalized and adapted to the old ways that she remains unchanged and refuses to accept it even in others. In *Second Class Citizen*, Emecheta equips Adah Ofili with economic independence, a little education, awareness of her marginalized status and a strong quest for freedom, hoping that these salient qualities can help her change the inequalities and oppression within the patriarchal family. Instead of accepting Adah as a partner in progress, Francis still enslaves her while luxuriating on her sweat.

In spite of the above, Emecheta still holds herself. She tries another possibility by putting the family in a more developed society, the United Kingdom, to see whether things would change for a loving, peaceful, equal, and unoppressive existence of husband and wife. Adah is determined not to compromise her freedom. Francis, like Nnaife, refuses to change. Adah, propelled by her undying desire equally refuses to give way. There is stasis. Emecheta believes both have reached the peak. She would not have allowed Adah to give way, having earlier expressed her displeasure with middle-class women who still allow themselves to be oppressed despite their awareness. In an interview with Raoul Granquist in *African Voices* (1989: 17-18) she says:

My main criticism is of women enslaving themselves. When you look at a country like Nigeria, we do not have very many educated women, yet the few there still submerge themselves into this type of system which they know is wrong... I can forgive the uneducated woman.... But the educated woman can limit the number of her children... can talk with her sisters outside the country ... can afford to travel. Yet she still goes back and allows herself to be trampled on by men who don't even know anything!

With *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta decides to tear down the patriarchal family as a way to guarantee the freedom of women as wives. Her anger has reached a peak and she can not see any alternative for their emancipation.

She has always shown a tendency to do away with the patriarchal family. In *The Rape of Shavi*, the ignorant women who have lived somewhat happy lives in a secluded rural community, Shavi, were violently torn apart by warriors and invaders. Emecheta deliberately allows the men, the 'gods' of their wives, to be separated from their supposed dependants to see if they (the wives) will not survive on their own. In fact, in most of Emecheta novels, whenever the male 'umbrella' is removed, the women never go down the drain with their men; instead, they face the challenges of life and forge ahead. Contrary to some men's fears when at the point of death, their families hardly collapse after their demise. A common reality, however, is that many families collapse socially, psychologically and even financially when the woman dies, especially in a monogamous Igbo family. After the death of Mr. Samuel Ogedemgbe in *Destination Biafra*, Mrs Stella Ogedemgbe shows herself as a strong, independent woman who is able to sustain her two sons and a restless daughter throughout the civil war. Her weak dependence on her husband when he was alive is revealed as pretence adopted just to keep her marriage alive; '... and to think she had played that character far over 25 years'!

The reality of many Igbo women as wives is one of mute dependence on the man; the man uses such as a weapon of subjugation. Even some learned Igbo women who are university graduates also behave similarly just to avoid breaking up their marriages. Often, it takes the fatal absence of the man or his bankruptcy to release the wife to struggle for the economic survival of the family. The wife then feels deeply cheated and starts the struggle when the barns are diminishing.

Emecheta does not wait for the wheel of fortune or natural disaster to carry out the work of women's liberation. She is of the view that women should start the fight against patriarchy (the quest for emancipation), early in life. Since the various strategies she explores in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second - Class Citizen* fail to achieve the desired effect, Emecheta makes Miss Debbie Ogedemgbe in *Destination Biafra* to turn her back on marriage as a matter of choice. It is as if Emecheta has left married women to their own fate, and has decided to mould independent women outside the family. Debbie is not ready to live the kind of life her mother lives. She hates and rejects the life of male

dominance which her mother tries to chart for her. Despite what society thinks, she determines not to marry. Her mother sees her as 'a mad woman with mad ideas' (160) and tries to drive home to her the reality of the African society, and of the Igbo culture in particular. 'An unmarried woman is not respected,' she warned her. 'It is a man's world here. Even if you remain single by choice, nobody would believe you' (Emecheta 1982:159).

It is easy for Emecheta, who lives in London, to suggest the rejection of the family as a means of women's liberation; but it is a different thing to live such an 'eccentric' life out here in Africa. We may even castigate her view as one of the ways by which foreigners perceive Africa and African problems. It may even be argued that she does not fully understand the meaning of life in the African context or the complexities of African cultures and of the liberation of Africa women. Molar Ogunidipe-Leslie, like several African writers, has warned on the danger of outsiders interpreting the African life for Africans and dictating what life is best for Africans, or charting for Africans the way that they should follow³.

Despite what one may feel or think, the issue of the total liberation of African women, especially as wives, has not been fully explored. Thus African feminists need to provide answers to such questions as: Can married women of our continent really become free? How can such freedom be achieved? What is the blueprint for action? How workable are the ways already suggested? What effects are the suggested ways currently having in the lives of African women who are or have been wives?

I believe in the sanctity of the family because of its crucial role in the creation of communal feelings and communal existence as Africans. The family is the primary cord, which ties African people together. It is the nucleus of what makes us Africans. But also, I believe that all hope is not lost regarding the liberation of African women as wives. I believe that African women can still be free as wives in the family. Although I share Emecheta's anger at the inhuman treatment women receive and the seemingly mute manner in which they seem to have accepted their subjugation, I do not believe that the only way out or the best alternative is to destroy the family or to turn away from setting up one. Even single parenthood in Africa has its problems. A single mother in Nigeria, for example, is more oppressed because she faces the double oppression of a woman who is both a daughter and an 'unmarried' wife. Single ladies may not be directly oppressed by husbands, but the African man is there to enforce the oppressive values of the patriarchal society everywhere at the office, highways, hospitals, police station and everywhere!

Pam Gems, a British woman also concerned with the oppression of woman, has examined the lives of contemporary British women in the light of the many 'liberating' laws relating to the sexual, family and social spheres of women's experience. In her play, *Fish, Dusa, Stas, and Violet*, she evaluates the effects of the new found freedom both on women themselves and the society in general. She concludes that not all types

of freedom are beneficial, and that what matters most is not just freedom but what is achieved through it; the quality of life such freedom offers to women, men, children and the society as a whole. From her point of view, the new found freedom of women has its own negative effects. Disruption of the family makes life even more difficult for women who choose to have children through marriage: young girls become 'anorexic', hating both childbearing and men; young girls who want to establish new homes are caught up between the ideology of freedom and what they sincerely want; men are emasculated and they live a more irresponsible life. The whole problem resurfaces in a new and more complicated form⁴.

Though I strongly opt for the preservation of the African family, it is certainly not in the old way that oppresses, subjugates and marginalizes women. The things that need to be changed are the 'terms of contract' in establishing the family. Emecheta has touched on the major social practices and conditions that help to place a woman in bondage in the family setting. These include the social, economic and political lack of development of the African continent; the bride-price; the lack of education and the economic dependence of women; and early marriage, among others. These things have to be changed. I am of the opinion that once this is done, the resultant contract will be different from what it used to be.

The poverty level of most African countries hinder development. As a result, many women are still living in darkness, unaware of the reality of their oppression. When Nnu Ego was in Lagos, she saw a different kind of life and raised questions about women. Such awareness helped her, though she could not accept the right or desired answers. The new awareness Adah gained in the United Kingdom helped her to face Francis. She was able to hit back at him, determined never again to hand over her pay packet to him; decided to practice birth control on her own; and walked out on Francis when he became unbearable. I do not suggest that all women should migrate to the cities or to the United Kingdom. I rather look forward to the development of the rural areas so that new ideas could be transmitted to women everywhere in Africa.

Both Adah and Nnu Ego entered the family on wrong contracts. Nnu Ego's was arranged by her father, while Adah's was out of necessity. Bride price was paid for both, and this practice is like a chain which ties them to their husbands.

What about women who are already wives in patriarchal setting, one may ask. I believe in the gentle but resolute insistence on what is fair, just and right. Economic independence and education will go a long way in giving women liberation and development. I agree with Ogunidipe-Leslie (1994:210) that African women should not expect freedom without sharing in the financial responsibility of the family. The educated middle-class women should definitely take the lead, charting the new course and bringing up daughters who are confident in the type of life they desire.

I do not despise some forms of organized or unified force capable of pushing the cause further and enhancing the pace of change - agitation, rallies, demonstrations,

public lectures, etc. The battle for the liberation of the African woman has begun and the victory is a matter of time. African women must be free and freedom means the co-existence of woman and man where everyone is recognized for what she/he is and what she/he can be; where everyone's opinion is respected; where everyone has the freedom to take decisions on issues affecting her/him and a joint decision on issues involving both parties; where the same opportunities exist for self-fulfilment and accomplishment of all and where both men and women live in mutual love and understanding. With this accomplished, the family will be a happy place where every male and female will be free from institutional oppression.

Notes

¹ See Molaria Ogundipe - Leslie's 'Stiwanism: Feminism in African Context' in *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*. New Jersey: African World Press Inc., 1994. Molaria describes them as obstacles in the way of the total liberation of African women.

² In her essay, 'Feminism, Female, Feminist,' in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds.) *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 123, Troil Moi defined the 'female essence' as a set of culturally established characteristics or a cultural construct, which all biological female are expected to possess and live by. In the same book, Julia Kristeva sees it as a matter of position, a patriarchal construct.

³ African women in union with the third world women have, at the 1975 Wesley Conference, disagreed with the intellectual and social attitudes and positions of the Euro - American feminists and gender scholars. Considering the complexities of African cultures, Molaria calls for a critical examination and decision on who should be the legitimate narrators of African cultures - Exiles?, immigrants? middle - class indigenous children who are educated away from their languages? She concludes, like most African feminists that African women must theorize their own feminism's' (see Molaria, 1994: 4,7, 208).

⁴ Pam Gems (quoted in Catherine Itzin 1980: 291) on the effects of pills and other liberating laws on sex, family and social lives of women, men and the society as a whole, is summarized in the quotation below:

I write about women now, women in their twenties who would almost certainly be mothers but for the pill. I do think that when the pill came in it was fantastic, now we have equality, now we can have the phallic freedom to screw as, where and when we want. But there is also the chemical and existential mutation.

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