

A QUEST FOR SELF-IDENTITY IN THE NOVEL THE SLAVE GIRL BY BUCHIEMECHETA

G. HERSHENI

Abstract

The slave girl published in 1977 by Buchi Emecheta describes the Nigerian culture. It is about the story of the slave girl Ogbanje Ojebeta who is sold into slavery and lost her identity. After the death of her parents, she is left with her two brothers. Her brother Okolie decided to sell her to one of his relatives called Ma Palagada who is rich in her trade business. Slowly Ojebeta accepted Ma and the fellow slaves. There are many other girls in Ma's place working there as slaves without even knowing about their own birthplace. Finally, after the death of Ma, she again decided to return back to her own place. Later she married Jacob and owned a house for her own. This paper focuses on how Ogbanje Ojebeta searches for her own self-identity.

Introduction

The slave girl is about the journey of a small girl Ojebeta from her childhood to slavery. Emecheta throughout the novel has not given any particular identity to the small girl except the title the slave girl. Emecheta is an ironic woman writer who is in search of the place where the women are treated as human beings without any dominance. The whole novel reflects her idea of women searching for her own identity. Ojebeta is the character representing the voice of many Nigerian women.

During the period of colonization, the position of Nigerian women is highly critical. Women are not treated as a human beings they were often sold into slavery by their own family members and they remained always under the control of their father, brother or under some new masters who can pay for them. They were ill-treated by their own masters itself. Women cannot raise their voice or say no to their masters they should obey them at any cause. Most of the people are sexually harassed by their own masters. If those women try to be against men or they try to escape they will be punished crucially they have no other way to escape from the situation. But the situation of Nigerian in the present day is far better than the period of colonization. But still, there are places that are treating women as their slaves.

Buchi Emecheta in most of her novel tries to explain the state of Nigerian women. She represents women as a whole and she tries to find out a solution for the problem through her writings. She brings out the sufferings and practice of Nigerian women in the male-dominated society. She demands the freedom of Nigerian women and also for their quest for identity. Emecheta wrote all her writings from the personal experience of her life. She felt like it is her duty to let the world know about the sufferings of women in her society. Buchi Emecheta's slave girl clearly identifies the reader about the sufferings of slaves.

The novel slave girl concentrates on the story of a small girl named Ogbanje Ojebeta. She is a longed child where everyone felt like she won't survive in this world for any longer but after the great struggle, she remained in this world alive so she is cared much by her parents, treated like a queen. After several years when she is nearly seven years old, she lost her parents because of "Felenza" a critical disease that vanished half of the Ibuza town. Ojebeta is left alone with her two brothers, one of her elder brethren left the village before the death of her parents and he never returned back, only Okolie is there with her. He felt like he cannot raise his younger sister very well so that he decided to sell her own sister to one of their relative called Ma Palagada who is rich in her trade business. He is actually in need of money for his upcoming dance so he decided to sell her for his selfishness. We can imagine the state of that young child who is merely seven years old. Now her only hope is her brother Okolie who seems to be like a father figure for her. She never even imagined that her brother will sell her to Ma Palagada. There she felt alone and lost her identity. Then she slowly started accepting Ma and other slaves in the house as her sister. After the death of Ma, she again felt helpless and thought of returning back to her place. She married Jacob and thought like she is not going to be a slave anymore.

The story of a slave girl by Emecheta is about the dying self-identity of women in Nigeria. In the being of the novel, it is mentioned that,

"Umedi had to come out into the open compound to have her child, since an "unclean" woman was never allowed into the hut of a man with the Alo title." (pg.17)

It is the situation where Umedi had to come out into the open compound for her delivery, since the woman is considered as unclean. Giving birth to a child is a natural process like how a seed getting germinated. It is the thing that, women are not allowed to have her own room even during her hard times. Women are meant to sacrifice everything in their whole life at first for their own family and then to her husband and then to her children. She is known to this world only through her husband later by their children. They don't have any particular identity for themselves. They are born and die without knowing anyone.

Umedi named her child as Ogbanje Ojebeta. When she is merely seven years old, she lost her parents where she felt alone and helpless. Her brother decided to sell her to Ma Palagada for eight pounds. At her very young age she losing her freedom, she didn't even enjoy her childhood days completely before that she lost her freedom and pushed into slavery. She doesn't have any other option except to accept the situation but she is struggling hard to adapt to the new environment. After she is sold to Ma Palagada, they asked her to remove all the charms tied around her. Ma felt the sound produced by the charms are greatly irritating so she ordered her to remove it. For them, it is seen only as an object but for Ojebeta it is the only thing that remains as a memory of her parents. When she is ordered to remove it from her, she pleased and felt like her own identity is lost.

Throughout the novel it is clear that women are not let to be free, they are always under the control of some men. At first by their family and then after some certain period, they will be under the control of new masters who is able to pay for their family. And then from the master to the husband who is able to pay her the bride price. Till their death, only the masters are changed continuously but the state of the women remained the same.

Ojebeta treated by Victoria very worse, who is a rich woman stays in Ma house. She often mentions her with the title 'slave girl' she is not even mentioned with her own name at once. Her own identity is totally eradicated and she is trying to push Ojebeta more into slavery and wants her to be as a slave for her throughout her lifetime. Being a poor girl is also another reason for her to be into slavery and to lose her identity. After the death of Ma, she felt like it is her opportunity to decide to go back to her own place or not. She then turned back to her own place there she is happily welcomed by everyone and then later she married Jacob and felt happy that she is not going to be as a slave anymore.

Conclusion

Emecheta's writing gives a moment of freedom for women. Like that here Ojebeta felt like she is going to be happy in her married life by owning her new house but the reality is that only the masters have been changed continuously, the situation remains the same. It came to be like dream happiness for her. No woman is let to be free with her own identity till last. Only through the education woman are able to free themselves from the male-dominated society. It is clear in Emecheta's real life too.

Reference

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Author's Biography

G. Hersheni

M.A. English Literature

Sri Krishna Arts and Science College, Coimbatore.