

Slavery, Trauma, and Identity: A Postcolonial Study of Selfhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*

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Abstract

The paper discusses slavery, trauma, and identity as portrayed in *The Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta. This paper employs a postcolonial methodology. It dwells on strength, oppression and revolt. The female body is a commodity as demonstrated in the novel. It also demonstrates how slavery is a trauma physically and psychologically. Ojebeta, the main character, is a victim of a system of control. She is deprived of her freedom and identity. Fear and silence form her life. But gradually she becomes conscious. She starts to realize her situation. The article applies the concept of Homi K. Bhabha. It demonstrates that identity is not predetermined. It is created by fighting and living. The paper contends that Ojebeta is not oppressed but becomes a person. In this way, the novel is a journey of trauma to self-assertion.

Keywords: *Slavery; Trauma; Identity; Postcolonialism; Selfhood; Gender; Resistance*

1. Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is a popular African author. She was born in Nigeria and later moved to Britain. Her writings revolve around the lives of African women. She is writing about gender inequality, culture, social struggles. In her novels, she has shown the challenges that women go through in traditional and colonial societies. She brings out the voices of women who are usually suppressed (Emecheta, 1977). The conflict of women against social and cultural pressure is a common theme of African literature. Numerous authors demonstrate the oppression of women within the family and society. These pressures are due to tradition, patriarchy and economic conditions. Women should follow societal regulations. They are deprived of choice and freedom (Loomba, 2005). The *Slave Girl* in this case is a significant novel by Buchi Emecheta. The story is written in the novel of a young girl sold as a slave. It shows her life in a world where humans are as property. Slavery dominates the body and the mind, which is demonstrated in the story. It also reveals how a young girl is finding it hard to survive in such a system (Emecheta, 1977).

Gender oppression is brought out in a clear manner in the novel. Women are objects. They are being sold and purchased as commodities. Their worth is determined by others. They do not have control over their own lives. Their opinions are disregarded. Their emotions are not valued. This is a bitter truth of many women in the traditional society (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Cultural practices also have impacts as demonstrated in the novel. There are traditions that advocate the slavery system. These practices make oppression seem normal. These systems are accepted by people without any doubts. This leaves women as victims. The culture is turned into an instrument of control (Homi K. Bhabha, 1994). The paper is an examination of how slavery traumatizes. The trauma is both physical and psychological. The body is subjected to strenuous work and suffering. The psyche suffers fear, loss and solitude. The identity of the person is influenced by these experiences. The main character starts to forget her identity (Caruth, 1996).

A postcolonial framework is applied in the study. It centers on concepts of power, control and opposition. The postcolonial theory describes how systems oppress and mute people. It also demonstrates the reaction of people to such control. People resist in all kinds of hard situations (Bhabha, 1994). At the paper, identity formation is also discussed. The identity is not determined. It varies with experience. The main character gradually comes to consciousness. She starts to realize her condition. This results in a self-identification (Hall, 1990). This work is intended to demonstrate the process of the subject into subject. The main character begins as a weak character. She is traumatised and oppressed. However, she gradually develops strength. She moves towards self-awareness and self-assertion. *The Slave Girl*, therefore, is a strong narrative of pain and change. It demonstrates the negotiation of identity by a woman in control systems. It also reveals that in oppression there is the chance of selfhood.

Review of Literature

Buchi Emecheta works are well studied by the scholars. The majority of the studies revolve around gender, identity and postcolonial issues. The chosen work offers a solid foundation to interpret *The Slave Girl*. Raghav (2008) also provides an in-depth analysis of the novels of Emecheta. The research is concerned with the identity and self-expression of women. It demonstrates that female characters find it difficult to establish themselves. The theme of writing the self is emphasized in the work. It claims that women of Emecheta shift to voice. This notion upholds the notion of selfhood in the current paper. In his work, Frank (1982) focuses on African womanhood in the fiction of Emecheta. This paper will be interested in *The Slave Girl* and how it portrays women. It contributes that slavery dehumanizes women. It also demonstrates the influence of social structures on the construction of female identity. Humiliation of dignity and autonomy is pointed out in the study. This is in line with the theme of commodification in the current paper.

The article by Otuegbe (2023) is about the writing of Black women on the topic of trauma. The paper relates slavery and colonialism to psychological torment. It demonstrates the impact of trauma on memory and identity. It states that trauma is an intergenerational experience. This concept assists in perceiving the psychological effects of slavery in *The Slave Girl*. Chaudhary (2023) dwells upon gender and postcolonialism in Emecheta novels. The paper demonstrates the interaction between patriarchy and colonialism. It describes the way women are doubly oppressed. It also brings out the resistance and identity formation. This supports the use of a postcolonial framework in the present study. Akgul (2025) explores cultural origins and strength in postcolonial stories. The research points out how Black communities are strong. It demonstrates how culture assists in the quest to survive and identity. It contends that resilience plays a crucial role in conquering trauma. This concept can be applicable in the study of the process of Ojebeta acquiring selfhood.

Olaogun (2002) examines the issue of slavery in African literature. The study is aimed at the representation of slavery in various texts. It brings to light the influence of history and culture in the development of identity. It further discusses the impact of slavery on the lives of women. This work gives an overall background to the interpretation of *The Slave Girl*. In general, the studies are concerned with gender, trauma, and identity. They point out the oppression and resistance in Emecheta. Nevertheless, little attention is given to how physical trauma is intertwined with psychological trauma and selfhood within one framework. The application of postcolonial theory and in particular, the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha to understand identity reconstruction are also less emphatic. Thus, the present study fills this gap. It is an amalgamation of trauma, identity, and postcolonial theory. In *The Slave Girl*, it is concentrated on the transition of the subjugated to the self.

Slavery and Physical Trauma

The Slave Girl is cruel and agonizing slavery. Ojebeta, the main character, is used as an object. She is not considered as a human being. She is sold and bought by people. She is powerless in her life. At a tender age, she is deprived of her freedom. Buchi Emecheta distinctly demonstrates the commodification of the body. A price is offered to Ojebeta. She is determined by the rest of us. This makes her a mere economic object. According to what the text says, "She was bought as a slave for eight pounds" (Emecheta, 1977, p. 10). This sentence depicts that human life is degraded to money. It is an indication of loss of dignity and human worth. Ojebeta is subjected to physical abuse on a daily basis. She has to work round the clock. She does housework and follows instructions. "She worked from morning till night without complaint" (Emecheta, 1977,

p. 22). This underscores the physical toll that is being taken on her body. Fear is another way that the novel demonstrates she is controlled by fear. She is in a state of everlasting insecurity. She is unable to speak freely. She is not able to resist publicly. According to the text, "She dared not question her mistress" (Emecheta, 1977, p. 27). This is an illustration of the working of power by fear. The body is quieted under the authority. In the system, there is also physical punishment. Discipline is strict. They are to be obedient at all times. This is the state in which a slave is supposed to live: "A slave must learn to obey without asking why" reasons (Emecheta, 1977, p. 31). This is indicative of the system eliminating individuality. It conditions the body to be controlled. The movement of Ojebeta is also limited. She has no choice of where to go. Her life is controlled by others. This state is revealed in the novel: her life is no longer hers (Emecheta, 1977, p. 45). There is total loss of autonomy in this line. The body is owned. These experiences cause profound physical trauma. The body is turned into a place of torture and domination. She lives her life by work, fear, and restriction. She is deprived of freedom under the system. It disowns her too. Slavery is her life.

This situation can be reflected in the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha describes the power that operates on cultural systems. Such systems manipulate people and form predetermined identities. Ojebeta in this instance is assigned with the name of a slave. This identity is imposed on her body. Another thing that Bhabha writes about is domination and cultural control. The consequence of the slave system is that an order of power is established between one group and another. The space where this power is being exercised turns out to be Ojebeta. She is controlled through her labour, silence and obedience. Meanwhile, Bhabha implies that identity is not determined. It is influenced by experience. Tension exists even in control. The pain endured by Ojebeta brings awareness. Her body is pain, yet memory. This becomes the starting point for change. In that way, slavery in the novel is physical not only. It is also cultural and psychological. The body is a representation of power and oppression. Ojebeta as a tragic hero of a social structure that is traumatized by postcolonial reading is obvious. Her life experience demonstrates how systems dominate the body and identity formation.

Psychological Trauma and Identity Loss

The trauma of *The Slave Girl* is physical, not only. It is even psychological. Ojebeta, the main character, has much fear and is lonely. She is divorced off when she is young. This detachment brings emotional distress. She is lonely in a strange land. This condition is evident in Buchi Emecheta. Early loss of Ojebeta has an impact on her psyche. She does not know what has happened to her life. This shows her confusion in the text: she could not comprehend why she was taken away (Emecheta, 1977, p. 12). This shows the beginning of psychological trauma. The loss is hard to digest in the mind. Ojebeta too is lonely in her new surroundings. She has no emotional support. She is not able to express her feelings. The novel presupposes this situation: she had no one to refer to (Emecheta, 1977, p. 18). This highlights her loneliness. Isolation enhances her psychological pain.

Her identity is slowly shaped by others. She is reminded every minute that she is a slave. She starts to embrace this imposed identity. This transformation is reflected in the text: she started to consider herself a slave (Emecheta, 1977, p. 25). This is the way the external control penetrates the mind. No longer is identity self-defined. The result of this is loss of personal identity. Ojebeta forgets her past life. She becomes detached to her family and roots. This change is pointed out in the text: "It felt like her former life was a far-off thing (Emecheta, 1977, p. 41). This indicates not following her roots. Memory deteriorates with pressure. She is also unsure of her future. She is not aware of what happens to her. She lives in fear. This is the feeling of anxiety which is expressed in the text: she was living day by day and did not know what tomorrow could bring (Emecheta, 1977, p. 56). This instills instability in her mind. Security is lacking.

The trauma disrupts her inner harmony. She is unable to think freely. Her emotions are controlled by fear and obedience. She loses consciousness. This is an indication of how oppression has a profound effect on the mental health. The concept can be elucidated by the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. According to Bhabha, identity does not exist as a given one. It is influenced by the social and cultural forces. In the case of Ojebeta, the system of slavery imposes her identity on her. Bhabha also discusses such a term as in-between or cultural displacement. Ojebeta is the space between her former and present. She does not completely identify with her origin and does not have full control over her present. This produces a discontinuous identity. This condition is expressed in her psychological trauma. She may not know the difference between memory and reality. Loss and adaptation are in her mind. This conflict defines her. It is demonstrated in the novel that oppression does not just influence the body, but also the mind. Identity loss is associated with psychological trauma. It is evident through a postcolonial reading that identity is created under pressure. The experience of Ojebeta demonstrates the way in which the mind turns into a place of conflict within systems of control.

Power, Domination and Resistance

Power plays an important role in *The Slave Girl*. Women are governed by the social rules and customs of the system. Such rules determine the way women ought to conduct themselves. They curtail choice and freedom. Women have to be obedient. Power is not necessarily physical. It operates also by culture and tradition. Buchi Emecheta demonstrates how Ojebeta is under such control. Her status is always brought to her attention. She has to obey commands. This is evident in the text: she was aware that she must do whatever she was instructed (Emecheta, 1977, p. 24). This indicates internalization of power. Obedience is a part of her life. The oppression is both outside and inside. Ojebeta is owned by her owners, externally. On the inside, she starts to embrace this domination. She is taught how to be quiet. The reading indicates this state of affairs: she only held her thoughts to herself and talked only when she was asked to do so (Emecheta, 1977, p. 29). This silence demonstrates the role of power in influencing behavior.

However, Ojebeta is not completely passive. She starts to rebel in little ways. Her opposition is not necessarily open. It is usually subtle and silent. She notes the surrounding people. She gets to know the mechanism of the system. This consciousness is reflected in the novel: she was observing and learning all that was about her (Emecheta, 1977, p. 34). Survival strategy is observation. Her consciousness gradually transforms into a strength. She starts to realize her situation. This knowledge provides her with inner strength. This change is specified in the text: "She started thinking independently (Emecheta, 1977, p. 52). This marks the beginning of resistance. Thinking is rebellious. Opposition does not necessarily scream. It is capable of existing without noise. It may be in thought and memory. The resistance of Ojebeta is also through his survival skills. She does not completely lose herself. She holds on to her inner self. This concept can be expounded using the theory of Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha describes that there is never absolute power. There are places of resistance even in robust systems. These arenas enable people to bargain identity.

Bhabha talks of ambivalence as well. Power brings about control, yet it brings about uncertainty. The prevailing order relies on obedience, which cannot completely govern the mind. The silence and observation of Ojebeta bring about this ambivalence. She does not seem to be resistant to authority, yet she is intelligent. This consciousness forms some sort of resistance. It demonstrates that one cannot have full control. The topic is not completely subdued. Always room to negotiate. So the novel reveals that power and subjugation are powerful, yet not absolute. The path of Ojebeta embodies the change of silence to consciousness. Her opposition starts in the mind. A postcolonial reading brings us to the realization that, despite oppression, there is always a chance of resistance.

Reconstruction of Identity and Selfhood

The main character in *The Slave Girl* starts to transform despite the trauma. Ojebeta is not the same person. Her thoughts are informed by her experiences. She slowly starts to rebuild her identity. This process is not easy. It is painful and slow. It entails fighting and contemplation. Buchi Emecheta introduces this change in a straightforward manner. Ojebeta initially lives in silence. She obeys without reason. With time she starts to notice what is around her. She attempts to make sense of her predicament. According to the text, this change occurred: she started to realize that her life could be another (Emecheta, 1977, p. 60). This demonstrates the dawn of consciousness. She slowly shifts to being silent to consciousness. She starts to question her condition. She comes to the realization that she is not set in her identity. This moment is reflected in the text: she understood that she was not what they used to call her (Emecheta, 1977, p. 68). This indicates self-recognition. She starts to identify herself as more than a slave.

She is also reconstructed with the help of her past memories. She recalls about her family and childhood. These are memories that provide her with emotional power. This relationship is depicted in the text: she recalled her mother and the life she used to live (Emecheta, 1977, p. 72). Identity is a result of memory. It assists her in reconstructing herself. Ojebeta gains inner strength, too. She gets mentally stronger. She learns to survive and cope. The passage implies the following development: "She had matured in her own way" (Emecheta, 1977, p. 80). Strength ceases to be physical. It is emotional and mental as well. In the novel, selfhood is not bestowed. It is developed with experience. Trauma does not destroy, but shapes Ojebeta. She is reconstituting herself bit by bit. This demonstrates that identity is dynamic. It changes with time and experience.

This can be described using the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha believes that the concept of identity is not static or definite. It is created where he refers to it as an in-between space. Negotiation and transformation is possible in this space. Ojebeta is in this liminal realm. Her past does not completely define her. She is not totally dominated by her present as well. She balances her identity between reality and memory. This is a process that forms a new self. Another notion that Bhabha mentions is that of cultural negotiation. Ojebeta does not reject her condition immediately. Rather, she evolves and ponders. In the process, she becomes aware. It is this consciousness that brings about selfhood. In this way, the novel introduces an oppression to self-assertion movement. The path that Ojebeta follows is challenging, yet not in vain. She passes through the silence into awareness, control to identity. The society does not bestow her selfhood. It is formed by fighting. As a result of a postcolonial reading, identity can be seen as a process. Power, trauma and resistance define it. The change of Ojebeta demonstrates that despite the oppression, there is a chance to selfhood and agency.

Conclusion

The Slave Girl is an action-packed narrative of the misery and transformation. The novel demonstrates the domination of slavery over the body and mind. Ojebeta is physically and psychologically suffering. She is used as an object. She becomes deprived of her freedom and identity. The analysis reveals that trauma is a significant influence on her life. It affects her thoughts and emotions. It brings terror and quietness. Her identity is controlled by others. She is compelled to live like a slave. Nevertheless, resistance can be found in the novel. Ojebeta is not completely passive. She contemplates and studies. She develops awareness. This consciousness turns into some inner power. It helps her to think differently.

The research uses the concepts of Homi K. Bhabha. His theory is that identity is not set. It is created within a negotiating space. Ojebeta resides in this hyphen. She switches between her present and past. Slowly, she reconstructs her identity. She remembers her past. She cogitates about her state. She starts to identify herself outside of slavery. This brings about self recognition. She is not as much at the mercy of others. So, the novel is a narrative of oppression-selfhood journey. The story of Ojebeta reveals that resistance can take place even within the control. Her change is gradual yet significant. It is an expression of human strength. Conclusively, the research indicates that slavery causes some form of trauma, but it does not eliminate identity altogether. Selfhood is achieved through struggle and awareness. The novel emphasizes on identity, resistance and cultural negotiation within a post-colonial setting.

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