

# Trauma and Resilience in Buchi Emecheta's the Slave Girl

T. Sindhu<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Suresh Frederick<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Research Scholar, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Department of English, Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17. India.

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor and UG Head, Department of English, Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17. India.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Slave Girl* by Buchi Emecheta recounts the terrifying tale of Ojebeta, a young Nigerian lady who is sold into slavery by her own brother. Ogbanje, “small, helpless, terrified, a little girl festooned with bells and cowrie shells, just like a slave prepared for sacrifice” (59), races through the market looking for an escape. As Ojebeta struggles with the loss of her family, home, and independence as well as the dehumanising realities of physical and psychological torture inside the institution of slavery, the story explores the deep anguish she experiences. Okolie represents, as Rose Ure Mezu points out tradition which “confers on men total power over all females, be they wives or daughters or sisters.” (Mezu 140) Ojebeta, however, exhibits incredible fortitude in the face of immense adversity by relying on her cultural background, her connections with other enslaved women, and her inner strength to resist and endure. Slave women were particularly vulnerable inside the enslavement system. They endured the same physical brutality and ruthless labour as men, but they also had to live with the continual fear of sexual abuse and exploitation. Women, who were frequently in charge of preserving kinship networks and passing down customs amid the chaos of forced migration and separation, were further burdened by the breakdown of family structures and cultural links. This particular form of oppression has severe psychological repercussions, including internalised sentiments of helplessness, shame, and the difficult task of re-establishing one's identity following independence.

### The Trauma of Loss and Betrayal

The novel commences with a profound act of treachery, as Ojebeta is sold into slavery by her own brother, an event that obliterates her feeling of belonging and security. The loss of her family, home, and independence exerts a significant psychological effect, causing Ojebeta to contend with emotions of isolation, sorrow, and a deep sense of dislocation. Okolie's reasons for selling his sister are focused on making money, but he tries to justify his actions in the end that, “Even if she was an only daughter, she was still only a daughter. (80)” Okolie feels his need is more urgent than his sister's, so he exchanges her for eight pounds because he, “desperately needed whatever money came his way to prepare himself for his coming-of-age-dance ... to purchase strings of cowries and little bells ... large, colourful, ostrich features.” (41) The anguish of this separation is exacerbated by the recognition that she has been objectified, deprived of her individuality and autonomy. This work illustrates that this dehumanisation is a fundamental aspect of slavery, exacerbating the difficulty of Ojebeta in preserving his identity.

### Physical and Emotional Abuse

As a slave, Ojebeta is subjected to a myriad of physical and emotional abuse. She became distressed and expressed her sorrow through tears “Oh, you were too young then. You don't understand. He fiddles

with me. He used to make me do things... O my chi helps me in this household. (92)” The slave girls had to keep their mouth shut about the sexual harassment by their masters because they had nobody to help them. The graphic depictions of the different sorts of abuse she experiences, both physical and psychological, offer a horrifying picture of slavery's dehumanising impact. These experiences add to the severe psychological wounds that Ojebeta must overcome, such as anxiety, fear, and a struggle with regaining trust in others. At this point, Ogbanje's captivity seems to be more of psychological nature than physical. Emecheta here introduces the readers to different categories of enslavement. To her, “The greatest type of slavery is the enslavement of ideas” rather than the enslavement of the body.

#### The Dehumanization of Slavery

The institution of slavery systematically deprives Ojebeta of her individuality, regarding her as a mere property rather than a human being. As Lloyd Brown says “her dependency, apathy, and ingrained habit of accepting a subordinate status are equated with a slave mentality.” (53) The story examines the impact of profound dehumanisation on Ojebeta's identity as she contends with the loss of her autonomy and individuality. The wider implications of slavery on African women, as examined by many researchers, offer deeper understanding of the catastrophic effects of this systemic dehumanisation.

#### The Psychological Scars of Slavery

The psychological trauma of slavery caused profound and enduring damage to Ojebeta's psyche. The trauma of loss, resulting from the sudden separation from her family and familiar environment, engendered an intense feeling of insecurity and vulnerability. This emotional fracture is exacerbated by the persistent physical and emotional abuse she suffers, resulting in entrenched worries and a great mistrust of others. Chiago, was another slave girl also a victim of Pa Palagada, “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 quite about it all” (93-94). The dehumanising essence of slavery, which reduces persons to mere commodities, deprives Ojebeta of her self-worth and autonomy, compelling her to grapple with the restoration of her identity. Despite freedom, these scars persist, obstructing her capacity to establish healthy relationships and navigate a world that continues to marginalise her. The persistent anxiety of more aggression engenders a condition of hypervigilance, inhibiting her from attaining genuine freedom and tranquilly. Furthermore, the internalised oppression she has internalised during her enslavement may appear as self-destructive behaviours and challenges in asserting her own wants and aspirations. Healing from these psychological traumas is a protracted and challenging endeavour, necessitating individual mental resilience and society's recognition and rectification of the deeply rooted injustices that caused them.

#### Resilience in the Face of Adversity

Despite the overwhelming trauma she faces, Ojebeta demonstrates remarkable resilience throughout the novel. Her acts of resistance, both large and small, reflect her determination to maintain a sense of agency and self-worth in the face of overwhelming adversity. Ojebeta's connection to her cultural heritage and traditions also plays a crucial role in sustaining her, as she draws upon the strength and wisdom of her ancestors to persevere. The support and camaraderie she receives from other enslaved women are also instrumental in Ojebeta's journey towards resilience and survival.

#### Resilience and Resistance

Ojebeta's resilience is manifested through her acts of resistance, both overt and subtle, against the

dehumanizing forces of slavery. Despite the brutal realities of their enslavement, Ojebeta and other enslaved women displayed remarkable resilience through various forms of resistance. These acts of defiance, though often subtle, represented a powerful assertion of their will to survive and maintain a sense of self in the face of dehumanization. While physical resistance, such as running away or open rebellion, was always a possibility, the daily realities of slavery often necessitated more covert forms of resistance. These could include acts like feigning illness, working slowly, or breaking tools, which disrupted the plantation's productivity and subtly challenged the slaveholders' authority. Beyond these individual actions, enslaved women found strength in collective resistance, creating hidden networks of support and solidarity. They shared stories, songs, and traditions, preserving their cultural heritage and nurturing a sense of community that served as a powerful buffer against the psychological assaults of slavery. For instance, spiritual beliefs and practices often played a vital role, offering solace and a sense of hope in the face of despair. Furthermore, passing down family histories and cultural knowledge became an act of resistance, ensuring the survival of their identities and traditions amidst the systematic attempts to erase them. Through these combined acts of individual and collective resistance, enslaved women like Ojebeta not only survived but also actively challenged the institution that sought to break them, demonstrating the indomitable human spirit's capacity to resist even the most oppressive forces.

### Reclaiming Identity and Freedom

Ojebeta's journey towards liberation, both physical and psychological, is a central focus of the novel. Having endured the trauma of slavery, Ojebeta must navigate the complex process of reclaiming her identity and sense of self. Ojebeta's journey toward reclaiming her identity and freedom is a gradual and arduous process, marked by both small victories and significant setbacks. When Victoria urges Ojebeta to accompany her to her home, Ojebeta for the first time sniffing freedom throws caution to the wind and shout back at her tormentor, “ ‘I’ m going back to my people. I’m going home’ ... ‘No’, Miss Victoria. I’ll not come with you. I shall pay back every penny my brother borrowed... why should I go with you? (SG 148) It begins with an internal resistance, a refusal to be completely defined by her enslaved status. This inner strength is nurtured by her memories of her family and the traditions of her past. She decides to return to her homeland rather than be bought a second time. Her own land welcomes her jolly fully. Chiago advises her as she departs from the Palagada homestead: “ Go to your people, and eat the mushroom of freedom if they cannot afford to buy your meat.” (SG 150) She clings to these fragments of her former life as anchors in a sea of uncertainty and dehumanization. As she navigates the complexities of her new environment, Ojebeta seeks opportunities to assert her agency, however limited they may be. She learns to read and write, a powerful act of self-empowerment that opens up new possibilities for her future. As she receives the rudiments of education at the Palagada’s Wilhelmina observes that “Education is the crucial liberating force in the lives of Emecheta’s heroines, and in fact their degree of servitude is inversely proportional to the amount of education they receive.” (Wilhelmina Lamb, quoted by Katherine Frank, 481) This pursuit of knowledge becomes a form of rebellion, a way to reclaim her mind and spirit from the grip of slavery. Later, marriage to Jacob offers a semblance of normalcy and companionship, though it is not without its challenges. While it provides a degree of protection and social standing, it also brings new responsibilities and limitations. Ultimately, Ojebeta’s liberation is not a single event but a continuous process of self-discovery and self-assertion. It is a testament to her resilience, her determination to define her own life on her own terms. Emecheta concludes the novel with a bitterly ironic statement: “As Britain was emerging from war once more

victorious, and claiming to have stopped the slavery which she had helped to spread in all her black colonies, Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters” (179).

## Discussion

Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* provides a poignant exploration of trauma and resilience as experienced by enslaved women in colonial Nigeria. Through Ojebeta's story, Emecheta illuminates the devastating psychological impact of forced separation from family, the dehumanization inherent in the institution of slavery, and the constant threat of physical and emotional abuse. Ojebeta's narrative, however, transcends mere victimhood. The novel powerfully showcases her resilience, and her persistent agency in a system designed to strip her of it. Ojebeta's acts of resistance, though often subtle, demonstrate her unwavering determination to maintain a sense of self. These acts range from preserving memories of her family and cultural heritage to seeking opportunities for education and self-improvement. (Emecheta) highlights Emecheta's own negotiation of multilayered systems of oppression, offering a parallel to Ojebeta's struggle within the novel.

Emecheta's portrayal of Ojebeta's trauma and resilience resonates with broader themes in postcolonial African literature, particularly the experiences of women grappling with patriarchal structures and the legacy of colonialism. Similar to characters in the works of Tsitsi Dangarembga and Chimamanda Adichie, Ojebeta's struggle reflects the challenges faced by many women in asserting their agency and reclaiming their identities in societies marked by historical oppression. The novel's exploration of Ojebeta's internal world, her psychological struggles and triumphs, provides a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between individual experience and societal forces. This novel explores psychological afflictions within a postcolonial context and can reveal the deep-seated impact of historical trauma.

Moreover, *The Slave Girl* can be examined within the context of other slave narratives and literary works exploring similar themes. Comparing Ojebeta's journey with those depicted in *The Book of Negroes* or other historical accounts can further illuminate the diverse ways in which enslaved individuals resisted and survived. The novel emphasizes the role of education in Ojebeta's growing self-awareness, a recurring theme in narratives of empowerment. By placing Ojebeta's story in conversation with these broader literary and historical currents, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the enduring power of the human spirit to overcome adversity and forge a path toward liberation, even in the darkest of times. “The alien religion is obviously another of those foreign European influences that have helped to undermine local values.” (Brown, *Women Writers* 57)

## Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* is not simply a story of suffering; it is a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Ojebeta's journey, marked by both profound trauma and determined resistance, illuminates the complexities of navigating a world designed to oppress and dehumanize. From the initial shock of separation from her family to the daily indignities of her enslaved existence, Ojebeta confronts a constant barrage of psychological and physical assaults. Yet, amidst this darkness, she discovers the strength to resist, to reclaim her identity, and to forge a path toward a future of her own making. *The Slave Girl* highlights how Ojebeta must ultimately decide her own destiny, a powerful summary of the novel's core theme. Emecheta creates the story of Ojebeta, the slave girl who is continuously at the mercy of male master figures.

All her life a woman always belonged to some male. At birth you were owned by your people, and when you were sold you belonged to a new master, when you grew up your new master who had paid something for you control you. (SG 113)

Ojebeta's resilience is not a passive acceptance of fate; it is an active process of self-discovery and self-assertion. After Jacob purchases Ojebeta formally from Clifford, she kneels before him, saying, "Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master" (184). It is rooted in her memories of her past, the cultural traditions that sustain her, and the relationships she forges with other women who share her plight. Through these connections, Ojebeta finds strength and a sense of belonging in a world that seeks to isolate and break her. Ultimately, Ojebeta's story is a testament to the enduring power of hope and the indomitable human capacity to overcome even the most daunting of circumstances. It is a story that resonates with readers long after the final page is turned, reminding us of the importance of fighting for freedom, dignity, and self-determination, not just for ourselves but for all those who have been marginalized and oppressed.

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