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SLAVES OR MASTERS? RE-EVALUATION THE IMAGING OF SLAVES IN BUCHI  
EMECHETA'S *THE BRIDE PRICE* AND *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD*

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ABSTRACT

The mystery surrounding slaves among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, especially as regards outcasts is quite weighty, much like the fate of the Dalits of India. The reluctance of many writers, until recently, to broach this topic betrays the sensitivity of the issue. Buchi Emecheta's bravery in tackling this topic is marred, in *The Bride Price*, by the rather, unwarranted death of Akunna, the heroine. Criticisms against Emecheta though apt, do not consider her positive portrayal of slaves and outcasts in her two novels, *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. The incisive juxtaposition of the brutality and mediocre of the freeborn against the benevolence, affluence and influence of the so-called slaves/outcasts is the concern of this paper. Truths in the texts vis-à-vis the realities in the Igbo society aid in confirming that Emecheta's intention in these two novels speaks to the exposition and condemnation of a horrible tradition. Thus, Akunna's death is understood from a distinct point of view. Her unpopular demise goes further to show the power of a barbaric culture which the author brings to the fore in order to realize a positive change. Akunna, becomes the sacrificial lamb who is chosen to die in order to expose the effects of an uncouth practice on a section of the society designated as slaves. Finally, if the so-called slaves are humane, successful and influential; if they can have the prohibited intimate relationships with the freeborn to no defined consequence, as evident in *The Bride Price*, then the notion of outcasts as defiled and untouchable is false and nonsensical.

Key Words: Slaves, outcasts, Igbo, society, tradition, freeborn

INTRODUCTION

The tradition that designates certain members of the society as outcasts is prevalent, majorly, among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria and the India. The Dalits, in India, are regarded as defiled and, therefore, untouchable just as is the case with the Osu of Igbo land. These groups of people are severely segregated, subjugated and stigmatized. They are not permitted to live together or intermarry with the freeborn; they are grossly marginalized in political and economic affairs, among other things. Regarding the debasement of Dalit's

women, V. Prabhakar observes, "The long haul ramifications of this viciousness for her own well-being and social relations are matters of profound worry for her. The Dalit woman is a Dalit among Dalits. She has endured much and she is as yet enduring." (21) These unfortunate people are, generally, referred to as slaves among the Igbo and there is, only, a handful of differences between the way the slaves (Ohu), and the outcasts (Osu, also known as Ohu-Arusi) are treated. It is a taboo for the freeborn to have certain relationships with the so-called slaves. Issues regarding slaves are often spoken in hushed tones. Until recently, it is rare for the Osu story to be told publicly. This explains the accolades that greeted the advent of Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Bride Price*. However, the novel is later faulted for the incongruous demise of the heroine, Akunna. Emecheta explains:

In *The Bride Price* I created a girl, Akunna, who had an almost identical upbringing to mine, and who deliberately chose her own husband because she was 'modern' but was not quite strong enough to shake off all the tradition and taboos that had gone into making her the type of girl she was. Guilt for going against her mother and her uncle killed her when she was about to give birth to her first baby. (Emecheta, *Head above water* 155)

Emecheta's explanation of the reason for Akunna's death lacks support from the novel as will be shown later. However, her tackling of this major societal ill, in *The Bride Price*, positions the novel as one of her best three, and would have, perhaps, be regarded as the best, but for the indicting death of Akunna. That *The Bride Price* treats a highly controversial, but very insightful issue is not to be argued. It is an intricate matter which many, hitherto, would rather not discuss for obvious reasons - The *Diala* i.e the freeborn are averse to championing it for fear of being labeled *Osu* (outcasts/slaves); the so - called outcasts would rather not be associated with any discussions bordering on that to avoid the embarrassment of exposing themselves. Emecheta makes bold to address this issue. Her membership of both the world of the *Diala* (by birth) and that of the *Osu* (by marriage) gives her the confidence and navigational expertise to take a dive into this rather turbulent sea. However, she fails to bring her fight for this grossly discriminated group to a meaningful conclusion. If only Akunna does not have to die, or if, only, Emecheta gives a different, more factual reason (in relation to events in the novel) for Akunna's death. And this has been viewed as the novel's greatest undoing. Hence, the mystery in *The Bride Price*, and the war which Emecheta sets out to fight and hopefully, win, would have been better realized, perhaps, if the story had ended at the point where Akunna becomes sick and is prayed for and taken to the hospital (172 & 173). The doubt regarding whether or not she died would have given the story a sharper edge and more depth. Lacking that adrenalin-augmenting-mystery and a significant finish, *The Bride Price* is like a bad case of constipation of which the sufferer expends great energy trying to push out the discomforting excreta, yet will have to get up and walk in a funny way because the annoying feces thrusts out its strong head, but will not go any further - forward or backward. This is not a write off on *The Bride Price* because the positive imaging of the slaves clears the myth surrounding and supporting the inhuman treatment meted out to them. On the regrettable death of Akunna, Ernest Emenyonu observes:

This is an unsatisfactory ending, for it confirms the traditional superstition that the author knowingly (unlike her fictional heroine) seeks to eradicate. It removes the sense of commitment in Buchi Emecheta's fiction and makes her no more than a reporter who succeeds in narrating the woes of African womanhood, echoing its agonies, exhibiting its wounds, while firmly withholding a balm for its gaping sores. *The Bride Price* becomes a protest that projects no sense of alternative direction. (257-258)

Boostrom agrees that, "Her (Akunna's) escape with Chike from this frightening and demeaning situation should not have been so morally culpable as Emecheta authorially decided it was by having Akunna later die in childbirth..." (70). Boostrom further notes:

Therefore, the novelist stated purpose in having her (Akunna) die appears quite unnecessary except to belie the novelist's sympathetic portrayal of her tragic heroine, which in turn causes the reader to be sympathetic to the need for social change. (58)

The prevalence of this appeal for social change is obvious, also, in *The Joys of Motherhood* through the sufferings of Nnu Ego, the slave girl's reincarnate. For the sad tale of Nnu Ego, the unfortunate child whose *chi*

is that slave woman, buried alive, so to say, with her mistress, forms the core of *The Joys of Motherhood*. The focus of this paper is inherent in the analyses of the unique and subdued manner through which Emecheta sets out to achieve this social change, in both *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. Though marred by Akunna's death, the positive portrayal of the slaves in these two novels reveals Emecheta's intention to condemn a major societal ill. Should the didactic essence of *The Bride Price* be disregarded due to the authorial error in the heroine's demise? Does the imaging of slaves in these novels reveal something about the futility of a tradition that castigates some of its own by, merely, designating them as slaves? Can Akunna's death be understood from a perspective different from the obvious and the author's unfitting explanation?

### **Slavery in Igbo land**

Achebe poses a significant question and readily provides an answer, "What is this thing called Osu? Our forefathers in their darkness called an innocent man Osu, a thing given to idols, and thereafter, he became an outcast, and his children, and his children's children forever" (*No Longer at Ease* 56). G.T Basden seems to give an answer to Achebe's rhetorical question above: "An Osu is a slave, but one distinct from an ordinary slave (ohu/oru) who in fact is the property of the god and when devoted to a god he has no prospect of regaining freedom and he restricts his movement to the protocols of the shrine to which he was attached" (Qtd in Onwubuariri 61)

This practice is at war with the Igbo tradition which thrives on justice and equality of man (male beings). V.C Uchendu quips:

The Osu system of slavery constitutes the greatest contradiction to Igbo equalitarian ideology. Osu are a people with status dilemma: a people hated and despised, yet indispensable in their ritual roles, a people whose achievements are spurned by a society which is aggressively achievement-oriented. Although Osu function as 'special' priests, they are not accorded the high status other priests who are 'general practitioners' enjoy. (89)

Slavery in Igbo-land is double-pronged, *Osu* and *Ikpa-Ohu*. *Osu* caste system refers to the custom of viewing certain people as defiled either because their forbears were sacrificed to the gods or were war captives, thus, they become outcasts. *Ikpa Ohu* is slave trading whereby certain people are made servants and are humiliated because they were bought or acquired as slaves. The Osu (outcasts), enjoys more freedom than the Ohu (slave). He acquires education and wealth at will. His greatest challenge is his restriction from having certain relationship with the freeborn. However, the social status of an Ohu can change over time in the event that his master grants him freedom and should he die an Ohu, his descendants may regain their freedom, someday. Unfortunately, an Osu is tied to his 'osu-ship' forever, him and his generation unborn. Association between a Diala and an Osu is strictly restricted. There are certain levels of relationship that a Diala is not permitted to have with an Osu; marriage is, perhaps, at the top of the list. There are different terms describing Osu in various Igbo community. Victor Dike observes:

The Igbo people refer to the osu in varied names; it is referred to as Adu-Ebo in Nzam in Onitsha. In the Nsukka area it is referred to as Oruma; it is called Nwani or Ohualusi at Augwu area. These names, Osu, Ume, Ohu, Oru, Ohu Ume, Omoni (Okpu-Aja), have the same connotation in Igbo land. The people referred to by the names are regarded as sub-human beings, the unclean class, or slaves. (2)

Oral history has it that the origin of such a dehumanizing tradition is traceable to less than ten centuries ago when there was an increase in the number of powerful deities who needed to be appeased and assuaged, hence, the need for more human hands to provide assistance to the high priests. The requirement for constant ululations, sacrifices and supplication to the deities, some of which were very powerful and tetchy, required that the providers of such services were always available to offer rigorous rituals to the gods. Therefore, sacred huts were erected close to the shrines of the deities where the high priests' assistants were trained and housed. For the purpose of rearing up more assistants, most probably, these "indigenous monks"<sup>1</sup> were permitted to marry and procreate. The enormity of their assignment and its sacred nature behooves them to relate sparingly with other members of the community who in turn holds them in awe because of their close association with powerful deities. As servants (ohu) of deities (arusi), they are naturally referred to as Ohu-Arusi and, the more derogatory, 'Osu.' It is only reasonable to assume that these servants, at the shrine of fiery

deities - who could kill or maim their attendants at the slightest provocation, were either war captives or members of the community who desecrated the land. This, relatively, explains the terrible discrimination against them till this day. Some have argued that the Osu were held in high esteem before the advent of Christianity which, drastically, reduced the worth of the traditional religion and, consequently, the Osu.<sup>2</sup> This belief is questionable especially when it is understood that the Osu are among the first converts of the Christian missionaries who kicked against such discrimination and accepted the Osu in their fold. Hence, the Osu are among the first to acquire education in their communities.

#### **The Imaging of Slaves in *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood***

Emecheta, obviously, sets out in these novels to further expose and challenge a culture which is cruel, not only to womanhood, but another section of human beings tagged slaves. She tackles the issue of slavery in Igbo land from the two aforementioned angles – *Ohu* and *Osu*. The attack on her for failing to lead her warriors of the slave battle to a clear cut victory notwithstanding, Emecheta, skillfully and subtly, champions the course of the slaves. This, she achieves by creating a wrestling ring with the *Osu* and the freeborn as contenders. In this battle, she concedes victory to the so-called slaves. It is to be noted, in *The Bride Price*, that the Ofulue family who are, supposedly, slaves and are, thus, defiled, are better off than any other family in Ibuza. They are sophisticated and occupy enviable positions in Ibuza. Emecheta writes:

The lasting effects of such old fashioned ideas about slavery were not new to Chike; he had heard it all before and was not too concerned about it. He was handsome and though women knew that he came from an '*Oshu*' (sic) slave family, they pretended not to see it. Had not his family produced many professional men? Did not his half brothers and sisters own the biggest and longest cars the town of Ibuza had ever seen? In fact, he looked down on most of the local girls. Yes, he had slept with lots of them in his late teens, and even still had a few mistresses among the younger wives of many old chiefs.

...The senior Ofulue was himself a teacher, though now retired; he had four wives all from nearby towns, and on the whole had led a very enviable life. The people of Ibuza would never forgive him for being so prosperous. They would never forgive him for having illustrious children, through whom the existence of a small town like theirs was being made known to the rest of Nigeria. (*The Bride Price* 84-85)

Emecheta presents the slave family as influential; they are wealthy, educated and attractive. Chike has his choice from the many "free" women who rally round him irrespective of the fact that he is a slave. He even has his way with the wives of certain respected men of the freeborn. One wonders, therefore, how Chike sleeps with these women and they are not considered as defiled. Even their freeborn husbands are not stricken down by some strange diseases - their wives having been polluted by a slave. The slaves are the teachers and the doctors; the freeborn go to them to receive education and good health, yet they do not get defiled by so doing.

The slaves could not be, truly, evil if they are very wealthy and posed much attraction to the women of the freeborn. If the women can be had outside wedlock by a slave, then what is left? Marriage is made sacred by conjugal relationship, and since Chike, so to say, consummates his relationship with these women who are not, in the words of Oguagua, "allowed to associate with him" (70), what then is the essence of the cultural practices that inhibit certain human beings? It is even implied that Chike fathered some of the children of the freeborn chiefs:

His conscience did not worry him on that score, for these wives were still in the flush of girlhood yet tied to ageing husbands who above all prided themselves on providing enough yam to fill their spouses' bellies. If they suspected that their wives needed more than yam to satisfy them, they were not talking. If they were aware that half the numbers of children being born and saddled with their name were not theirs, they knew better than to raise a scandal. (84-85)

In other words, there are, most probably, offspring of a slave living with and sharing the same parenthood with the freeborn; they are not outcasts, and can freely marry the freeborn with no consequences. Consider,

also, that the grandmother of the so – called slaves is “a princess who was captured from Ubulu-ukwu” (84). So, in effect, the taboos surrounding the slaves are mere speculations and hold no power, whatsoever.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Agunwa’s slave is buried with her, as tradition demands. The slave refuses to die. She begs for her life and struggles out of the grave when she is pushed in. The extent to which Emecheta finds such tradition a horrible one is disclosed in the following lines: “The women stood far off for this was a custom they found revolting” (23). This point is further emphasized when Agbadi rebukes his first son for hitting the slave, mercilessly. “Stop that at once!” Agbadi roared, limping up to his son. “What do you call this, bravery? You make my stomach turn” (23). Agbadi’s repugnancy of his son’s attitude goes further to reveal Emecheta’s disapproval of such custom, especially as Agbadi is characterized as tough and, often times, mean. His disapproval of his son’s attitude is a pointer to the author’s point regarding the brutality on the slave girl. The slave, in appreciation of Agbadi’s kindness, promises to come back. And no sooner than she breathed her last was her reincarnation evident in Ona’s illness.

This slave, who is highly discriminated against, wields so much power and influence in this novel that her reincarnate, Nnu-ego, suffers terribly on account of her (the slave woman’s) revenge mission. Nnu Ego’s issue with childbearing is said to be as a result of the fact that “the slave woman who was her *chi* would not give her a child because she had been dedicated to a river goddess before Agbadi took her away in slavery” (31). Nnu Ego suffers terribly in her childlessness. Once, when she could no longer take the ill treatment meted out to her by her former sweat-heart of a husband, Amatokwu, she demands an explanation and Amatokwu lashes out:

“What do you want me to do?” Amatokwu asked. “I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don’t appeal to me anymore. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman, he wants to be cooled, not scratched by a nervy female who is all bones.”

“I was not like this when I came to you. Oh, I wish I had the type of pride they say my mother had,” she cried in anguish (32-33).

One wonders at Nnu Ego’s words, why is she not as proud and elegant as her mother, Ona? Agbadi, her father, is also a dignified man, full of pride. Why, then, is a product of such parentage timid and docile? This can be explained on the reincarnation, the timidity and docility that characterize slaves are reproduced in Nnu Ego. Whatever suffering that Nnu Ego passes through is linked to her failed marriage with Amatokwu due to the slave woman’s refusal to give her children.

The slave woman is resilient in her decision to frustrate Nnu Ego, she might have been branded a slave by tradition but her spirit is as dignified as anyone else’s. Nnu Ego’s dream upon arriving her second husband’s home in Lagos is worthy of note:

In her exhaustion she dreamed that her *chi* was handing her a baby boy, by the banks of the Atakpo stream in Ibuza. But the slave woman had mocking laughter on her lips. As she tried to wade across the stream to take the baby from her, the stream seemed to swell, and the woman’s laughter rang out in the dense forest. Nnu Ego stretched out her arms several times, and would have touched the baby, had not the stream suddenly become deeper and the woman risen to a higher level. “Please,” Nnu Ego cried, “let me have him, please.” (45)

It seems her *chi*, the slave woman, pushes her into the hands of a man who does not meet her approval, “a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling first to 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 a smaller size above his weak jaw” (42). The animalistic approach to which he conjugated that marriage further intensified Nnu Ego’s ugly fate for “He demanded his marital right as if determined not to give her a chance to change her mind... Nnu Ego knew why horrible-looking men raped women, because they are aware of their inadequacy. This one worked himself into an animal passion” (44). Having driven Nnu Ego to this monster of a man, her *chi* allows her to become pregnant. Nnaife echoes this, “Your father is known for his traditional principles. I’d like to see his face when you tell him you don’t like the second husband he has chosen for you, especially since your *chi* has consented

to the marriage by making you pregnant” (50). There is something in this approval. Perhaps, her *chi* sanctions that marriage because Nnaife is a slave in a way, and consequently, Nnu Ego becomes a slave herself, as Cordelia rightly said: “They are all slaves, including us. The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work, instead of having been bought...” (51).

Nnu Ego discloses her primary reason for wanting children, “When one grows old, one needs children to look after one. If you have no children, and your parents have gone, who can you call your own?” (38). Ironically, however, when she did have children, they were not there for her in her old age (at a time when her frail mind surrendered to the torture that she had been through) even though they gave her a befitting burial. And this is all in the mission plan of her *chi* as is evident in her second dream:

When months later, Nnu Ego fell into that tired sleep often characteristic of early pregnancy, she dreamed she saw a baby boy, about three months old, who had been left by a stream. She had wondered to herself why this child should be so abandoned. He was half covered with mud, half mucus from his nose and mouth. She shuddered when she came closer to pick him up. He was very dark with the kind of jet blackness of her father, but chubby and extremely dirty. She did not think twice, but picked the child up and decided to wash him clean by the stream and wait for his mother. His mother did not come, and Nnu Ego dreamed she put him on her back, as the child was sleepy. Then in her daze, she saw the woman slave, her *chi*, on the other side of the stream, saying “Yes, take the dirty, chubby babies. You can have as many of those as you want. Take them.” She had laughed, and her laughter was ghostly as she disappeared into the grove of thick forest that bordered the stream.

Nnu Ego opened her eyes suddenly and exclaimed, “Oh, my God, not again!”(77-78)

The influence of the slave woman in this novel cannot be overemphasized. She is at the center of the narrative as the fate of Nnu Ego is the mainstay of the novel. Note that Nnu Ego dies in search of fulfillment as a mother – the one thing she truly craved for; she dies alone – the one thing she really dreaded. And as a mentally deranged person, she has died before her death, just like her *chi* died before her death, buried alive with her mistress. The slave woman’s power in avenging her killing is noteworthy. It echoes, loudly, the author’s purpose – to bring justice to the unjustly treated.

#### **Valiant Men and Villains**

The characterization of the slaves against the freeborn reveals love, humane attributes and civilization in one hand and hatred, cruelty and primitivism on the other hand, respectively. Notice that Akunna is ignored and maltreated by her fellow freeborn, but she finds succor in the loving arms of Chike, a slave. Abandoned by her mother in the race for Okonkwo’s attention, disregarded by her little brother and jeered by her classmates, Akunna, literally, runs into the willing hands of Chike. She suffers undue shame and humiliation in the hands of Okoboshi and his people simply because they do not want to lose her to a slave. Okoboshi’s mother explains to Akunna the reason for her kidnap:

“You are not to worry. We shall send a message to your mother. You are in good hands. My husband decided to get you for our boy this way because we saw and heard of the part that slave boy wanted to play in your life. No girl from a family as good as yours would dream of marrying a slave.” (139)

Akunna becomes the ultimate victim of a cultural practice that is as useless as it is fruitless. The cruelty of her kinsmen is assuaged by the love of a man who is labeled a slave, a pariah. Emecheta’s focus lies, solely, on exposing certain traditional practices against humanity – women on one side and slaves on the other. And in so doing, the freeborn are the culprit and the slaves are presented as humane. The ease with which a woman can become a man’s wife and be divorced, in either case without her approval, is, perhaps, the most appalling. A woman, automatically, becomes a man’s wife if she can be kidnapped, or if a strand of her hair is cut. Worse still, an unwilling bride is held down, forcefully, by male relatives of the groom while he rapes his new bride in the name of consummating the marriage (138).

In a culture where “every young man was entitled to his fun” (85), no single woman is allowed the slightest freedom, least of all, having a choice of a man to share intimacy with. Even in her menstrual cramps “Akunna knew that, pain or no pain, she was expected to get up and receive the young men who would

definitely be coming to visit her" (121). These men are allowed, by tradition, to fondle her breasts which was why "Okoboshi walked up to Akunna and seized her roughly at the back of her shoulder, he grabbed at both her breasts and started to squeeze and hurt her" (124). Akunna's protest and Ma Blackie's reply are worthy of note:

"Mother," Akunna begged. "Please don't say anything. Okoboshi was hurting me, he was... mother, look at my new blouse. He has torn it, he was so rough. He was wicked – oh, mother, please listen..."

Ma Blackie waved aside her pleas. "You mean you have nice breasts and don't want men to touch? Girls like you tend to end up having babies in their father's houses, because they cannot endure open play, so they go to secret places and have themselves disvirgined." (125)

Tradition has so conditioned women that they become blind to their own humiliation and, therefore, dance attendance to the evil masquerade of horrible traditions. Even a mother could not save her daughter from such horrible practices; instead, she pushes her deeper into it. Emecheta's treatment of women issues alongside the dehumanization of certain individuals goes to reveal her conviction that women are treated more or less like slaves in the society. This gives credence to John Stuart's words: "'No slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in as full a sense of the word as a wife is'" (qtd. in Moers 16).

The primitivism and diabolism of Okonkwo, Akunna's uncle is weighed against the enlightenment and kindness of Chike's father, Mr. Ofulue. Though, Emecheta does not own up to it in her explanation of the reason behind Akunna's death, it is obvious, from the novel that Akunna's death is a direct effect of her uncle's wicked resolution to get back at her for disgracing the family by marrying an outcast.

It was known in Ibuza that if you wished to get rid of someone who lived far away, you made a small doll in the exact image of the person and pierced the heart of the doll with a needle, or alternatively set it alight and allowed it to burn gradually. It was evident that it worked, though nobody was sure how because those who knew the art would not submit it to scientific investigation, the victim usually died, very slowly and very painfully. So it came as no surprise to Ma Blackie to see the image of her daughter one morning in front of Okonkwo's chi, his personal God, when she just happened to be passing by. She cried quietly for her daughter... she worried about her daughter and knew that unless something desperate was done to prevent it Okonkwo was determined to kill the girl. (163-164)

Even Akunna feels the effect of her uncle's fetish influence on her, she tells Chike's father who visited them and was about to leave:

"I hope I shall see you again, father. You see, I know my uncle does not want ever to accept the bride price. He calls me back in the wind, when I am alone. But I shall never answer. I don't want to die, father..." Akunna lowered her eyes, as if she had betrayed her husband. She made herself wave as the car moved off. She was frightened now of being by herself. Over and over again, she heard this voice calling her, telling her she must come back to her family, to her people. (172)

Clearly, the major force of attraction between Akunna and Chike is that both of them find themselves in a culture that alienates them for different reasons. They, thus, find solace in each other's arms, but are not allowed to flourish in their love for each other because of the same demeaning tradition. First, Emecheta reveals a people, their culture and tradition, she plants a vulnerable girl into it and shows how most cultural practices and beliefs inhibit the freedom of certain men (who are named slaves) and subdue women (who are at the receiving end of such tradition).

Note, also, that in *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta continues to pair the degradation of women with the discrimination against slaves. It is implied in the novel that the rather loud love-making between Agbadi and Ona, led to Agunwa's death (21 & 22). Agunwa is buried with her maid who later reincarnates in Nnu-Ego, the product of that union. "It is Nnu Ego, Chief Nwokocha Agbadi's only daughter, the daughter of Ona, who spends a lifetime, over forty years, paying for the callousness of her father" (Marie Umeh, 197). This love child bears the brunt of an enraged slave and it is through her suffering that Emecheta condemns a tradition that permits a man to disrespect the feelings of his wife in his reckless love affair with a younger woman, on one hand and a tradition that buries human beings alive simply because they are labeled slaves, on another hand. For had Agunwa not died, her slave would not have been buried alive in her prime. And Nnu Ego

would not have suffered as she did. Thus, Nnu Ego is punished as a way of ensuring justice for the degraded woman, Agunwa, and the dehumanized slave, Agunwa's slave.

### Conclusion

The ostracism, stigmatization and segregation of certain individuals as slaves and or outcasts, is rife in the Igbo society of Eastern Nigeria. Emecheta's boldness in addressing this anomaly stems from her membership of both worlds – being a freeborn (Diala) and getting married to an outcast (so-called). She tackles this very sensitive issue of slavery in Igbo land from its double pronged angle – Osu (outcast) and Ohu (slave). The imaging of these supposed sub-humans, in *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, respectively, goes to communicate, in clear terms, Emecheta's intention to expose and condemn the tradition of her people with regard to the prejudices against some groups of individuals in her community. Her portrayal of the slaves as educated, wealthy, humane, influential and powerful, as against the primitivism and inhumanity of the freeborn, is the glue that holds her purpose in place. The plight of women in the Igbo world is used to advance this aim.

In *The Bride Price*, Akunna's rejection and forsakenness, by her fellow freeborn, is juxtaposed against the acceptance and love she finds in the hands of Chike, the slave. Nnu Ego's desperate desire for the joy of motherhood and her denial of it, through the influence of the slave girl, constitutes the medium through which Emecheta achieves this in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The fact that Nnu Ego, the slave woman's reincarnate, spends the gamut of her life suffering, an indication that justice has been done to the slave woman, who is mercilessly killed, gives credence to Emecheta's antagonism of this tradition. Note that after the birth of Nnu Ego, "The slave woman was properly buried in a separate grave" (28). Her killing is, thus, vindicated, she is honored; Emecheta wins the battle against the tradition of burying people alive with their masters and mistresses.

However, the author's greatest undoing, in this laudable mission, remains her failure to bring her fight against the dehumanization of individuals, after labeling them outcast, to a victorious conclusion, in *The Bride Price*. The death of her heroine, Akunna, puts an iron lock on the prison gate, which she toils very hard to open, thereby dashing the hopes of the inmates and sentencing them to life imprisonment.

Nonetheless, though it would have been better that Akunna does not die in the end in order to give *The Bride Price* a sense of direction, her death is understood from a, completely, different perspective. Akunna's predicament can be seen as Emecheta's scheme to draw pity on Akunna and Chike and subsequently condemn a barbaric practice that subjects a section of humans to the dungeon of unending mystery. One who finds herself in that onerous situation can find solace, only, in death. Moreover, in no way does the author imply, in the novel, that Akunna's death is due to punishment from some gods. It is clear that she died from her uncles diabolic practices.

Finally, Chike, the handsome slave, had his way with women of the freeborn and it is implied that he begets sons for some of the freeborn chiefs (85). If Chike and the women, he is involved with, are not struck dead, or visited with some strange ailment, by some furious gods, then the taboos surrounding 'outcasts' and 'untouchables' are absurd and foolish. Humanity should, thus, be salvaged from the savagery of slavery in all its facets.

### NOTES

1. See Victor Dike. "The Osu Caste System in Igboland." *Discrimination Based on Descent. Proceedings of the Sixty-First Session of The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)*, Geneva, Switzerland, 8-9 August 2002.
2. See A. W Igwe and G. O Akolokwu. "The Scar that Has Resisted Erasal: The Discrimination of Osu of Igboland, Nigeria: Assessing the Human Rights Implications." *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014, pp. 277 – 285.

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