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**In her own voice: the status of women in
African societies as seen through two novels
by Buchi Emecheta.**

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FOREWORD

Women's status and particularly African women's status have been a subject of major concern for African human right activists and emancipated elites. For years, considerable research, outcry, and talk have been focused on women issues. Such importance given to women is thought feminist. "Feminism" as a terminology has been so politicized that it needs to be re-considered from the point of view of the African woman.

This research work should not be seen as one trying to promote this ideology, but one asking for re-examination of African women's status. It therefore departs from the idea of feminism.

The main message here is that we should attempt to recover those practices in African society that elevated the status of women to positions in which they play complementary role with their male counterparts, while recognizing that there are customs and practices which have to be banned or minimized to allow women to participate fully without discrimination in nation life.

DEDICATION

To the memory of Professor Noël Dossou-Yovo whose encouragement and motivation have helped undertake this study. Dear professor may your soul rest in peace!

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD.....	i
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
CONTENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the problem.....	2
Limitation of the study.....	2
Signification of the study.....	3
Literature review.....	5
Overview of the chapters.....	18
Chapter one: The author and her novels.....	20
1-1 Buchi Emecheta and the female protagonists in her novels	20
1-2 the plot of the novels under study.....	28
Chapter two: The social status of women in African societies	37
2-1 Women’s status through customary practices	40
2-2 Women’s status through marriage and family life.....	46
Chapterthree: Practices against women’s welfare in the novels under study	57
3-1 Traditional practices which undermine women’s welfare.....	57
3-2 Gender Discrimination.....	63
Chapter four: Suggestion to improve women’s status.....	69
4-1 Women’s empowerment through economic welfare.....	70
4-2 Women’s political empowerment.....	72
Conclusion	76
Annex.....	79
Bibliography	85
Webiography.....	93

INTRODUCTION

The proclamation of the year 1975 by the United Nations as the International Women's year and the celebration since then of 8th March as the International Women's Day have helped focus attention on women and gender discrimination around the world. In Africa, while women are still discriminated against in every society and walk of life, I wonder how women issues are dealt with.

Indeed, in the face of men's chauvinism, women in general and particularly African women have often taken a passive position. Often adhering to African values and codes, most African women content themselves with traditional roles of homemaking and child bearing. They are wrongfully denied access to the basic human need including education and white collar jobs among other things. Elaborating on these viewpoints, Eustace Palmer writes:

Male chauvinism is surely at its peak in African society where females are regarded by males as little better than goods and chattels. If they are wives, then their main use is as vehicles for procreating children thus immortalizing the husband's name and insuring the continuity of his line; if they are daughters, the father's only interest in them relates to the amount of money they will bring into his coffers in the form of bride price.¹

To all these predicaments of women I can add other traditional practices such as polygamy and dowry and their related problems that most Europeans consider as oppressing for African women. The problem of slavery so well criticized also has a symbolic relevance in critics' writings. However what do African intellectuals think about these practices which undermine women's life in African society? Do they accept them or do they reject them?

¹ Palmer Eustace, "A Powerful Female Voice in the African Novel: Introducing the Novels of Buchi Emecheta." *New Literature Review* 11 (Nov. 1982); p: 21-23.

Statement of the problem

Of course, the treatment of African women shall not continue to be unnoticed for long. That is the reason why some African human right activists and other emancipated elites such as Buchi Emecheta have undauntedly decided to write in order to criticize African women's status. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the status of the woman in two of Buchi Emecheta's novels: *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). The main question around which this research work revolves is to know whether the African woman is oppressed in the author's works. The answer to this question varies according to researchers who deal with women issues in African societies. I will see how women's oppression influences and conditions their status in African societies.

Limitation of the Study

It is a truism that Buchi Emecheta is a versatile and prolific writer, who has written more than twenty books (novels, short stories, and plays) dealing with various themes such as women abuse, child slavery, motherhood, marriage, polygamy, poverty, male domination, women schooling , freedom and women's emancipation etc... Though all her literary work is significant and effectively addresses those important themes concerning women, this research work does not intend in any way to tackle all the aspects of the question, nor does it claim to be able to discuss the entire body of Emecheta's writings. Instead, I have elected in this dissertation to focus on the status of women in African societies as seen in the following selected work:*The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta.

Emecheta's *The Bride Price* is a love story between Aku-nna and Chike, two young people. Their life is complicated by tribal customs they neither know nor understand. The novel deals with Aku-nna and Chike's struggle against

some ancestral practices in their society. The bone of contention in *The Bride Price* is marriage. I choose to work on this book because it better depicts the status of African women according to me.

The Joys of Motherhood tells the moving story of Nnu Ego, a West African woman who is devoted to her children; giving them all her life as a result that she finds herself friendless and alone in her old age. *The Joys of Motherhood* is a powerful commentary on polygamy, patriarchy and women's changing roles in urban Nigeria. I choose to work on this novel because, like *The Bride Price*, it presents a character who acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother; roles which confers a good status to women in Africa. It greatly takes into account the tribal customs that women undergo in African societies. But, what is meant by the word status?

Significance of the Study

The *Universal Learners' Dictionary* defines "status" as "the position of a person as a member of a group entitled to certain rights"². This definition is completed by *Mac Millan English Dictionary* as "the high social position that makes other people respect and admire you"³.

From these definitions, one can assert that a person's status or the position of any individual in a society depends to a large extent on the prestige that he or she has in the eyes of others. Generally, a person's involvement in the social, economic and political affairs is a basis for status allocation. The intensity and degree of involvement as well as the dexterity of one's performance lends prestige to the person and enhances his or her status. The importance attached to the task one performs as member of a group and how well one performs it is also a criterion for status allocation.

² Universal Learner's Dictionary. Edited by E M Kirkpatrick, 1980 ; p : 730

³ Mac Millan English Dictionary. Edited by Michael Rundell and Gwyneth Fox, p :1401

In traditional African societies, certain customary practices such as the naming ceremony, infant betrothal, excision, girl's virginity, marriage, widowhood, and levirate give a good status to women and make them enjoy a social prestige. They participate in the social, economic, and political affairs of the society together with men. Though men appear to play the dominant role, the relationships of a man to a woman has never been regarded as one of a "master to a servant", but they are parallel and complementary.

Today, our societies have become more male dominated ones. Gradually, women are robbed of their original status. Some social practices such as the arranged marriage, the bride price, women abuse and the hardship imposed on women by the newly imported economic system of the colonisation have degraded women's status and have maintained them in a permanent state of submission. Such practices are broadly accepted by some communities. In *The Joys of Motherhood* for example, Nnaife beats his second wife Adaku in the heart of Lagos. "Suddenly, Adaku screamed from inside the room. Help! Help! He is going to kill me, you madman"⁴. But though the beaten woman is calling for help, no man comes to her rescue. On the contrary Oshia, Nnu Ego's grandson who is around makes fun of it and runs away: "Serve her right Oshia said with wicked grin and ran away."⁵

Such a situation cannot happen in a village community of the traditional African society without the punishment of the tyrannical husband; and this may result in untold hardships including death, poor harvest and unpleasant weather condition and famine. This means that in traditional African society, women are rarely abused. To abuse an African woman is to abuse every element that gives life because all life giving and life sustaining elements in nature such as mother, earth, water and other elements are symbolic of womanhood and are constantly

⁴ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann, 1979 p: 150

⁵ Buchi Emecheta, *Idem* p: 151

linked with her. But how does it happen that such practices have become so recurrent and have perpetuated through ages henceforth?

In fact, the principle that women constitute a key factor of change is perhaps true. But we shall not forget that they are the ones who inculcate social values to children from their infancy. They therefore contribute enormously to perpetuating conformism in society and the idea of inferiority to which they often fall victim. One has to ask why this is so. The reason is that the feelings of inferiority are so deeply engraved in their conscience that women go on reproducing the mechanisms of their own domination through successive generations.

In the study of this research work, I have examined the relevant aspects of African life in search of facts to contradict or support the above assumption to see whether women should be considered as inferior or unequal to men. That is why it has been carried out through *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* in order to show how these novels mirror and highlight the norms and realities in African social milieu. Another point of this study is that instead of stressing the equality of genders as many people seem to show, it has focused on equal opportunities for women and men by making suggestions to improve women's status.

Literature review

Emecheta's narrative functions on several levels. But her major novels are the continuation of the topic of this research work: the investigation of women's place in African society. So, apart from the two novels under study, that is to say, *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, she has successfully written *In the Ditch*; *Second Class Citizen*; *The Slave Girl*; *Double Yoke*; *The Rape of Shavi*. In all these novels, she has contributed to the criticism of African women's status with regard to their place in society. To succeed in doing so, she

has created female protagonists whose characters and mannerisms are treated with precision and authenticity of details. The status of women, as described by Buchi Emecheta through her novels, is endangered by different forms of oppression her female characters are submitted to. But before discussing in further details the manifestation of oppression in the different novels under study, it will be useful to define the term oppression for the purpose of the development of this work.

In fact, the word oppression has been defined differently but for the purpose of this research work, the definition offered by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* expresses the realistic working mechanism of women's oppression. According to this dictionary, "to oppress somebody is to treat them in a cruel and unfair way, especially by not giving them the same freedom, rights as other people"⁶

Buchi Emecheta's major preoccupation is women within a given socio-cultural and economic setting. She also examines how such a setting acts on the life of women. She is particularly conscious of the fact that the African society poses the greatest obstacles to the lives of women to the extent that it limits them in their desire of freedom. When I go through most writings on Buchi Emecheta's novels by some writers and Researchers, I notice that they focus not only on critique of practices in Ibo society but also on the newly imported economic system that, unlike their native system, fails to validate or reward women's work. So it is not surprising that she preoccupies herself with themes that effectively portray the nature of oppressed women.

As Helen Chukwuma asserts in *Positivism and the Female Crisis*, the novels of Buchi Emecheta "have filled the gap between male and female

⁶ Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 8th edition, London : university press, p : 1033

characterization and shown the other side of the coin”⁷. In her careful analysis, Chukwuma recounts Emecheta’s feminism as seen in her portrayal of female characters from the slave girl prototype to the mother and single fulfilled woman. Furthermore, Chukwuma believes that Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* depicts the oppression of young female adolescents. And of the *Joys of Motherhood*, she maintains that a woman can only escape the tyranny of tradition by asserting her individuality; and still play out the role of daughter, wife, and mother.

In another review “*The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta*”, Katherine Frank observes that Emecheta’s growth as a novelist, starting from her autobiographical novels to *The Joys of Motherhood*”, has been to present her own vision of African womanhood under oppressive African tradition.

In addition, Cynthia Ward, in “*What they told Buchi Emecheta, Oral Subjectivity and The Joys of Otherhood*”, observes that Emecheta, rather than being accused by critics like Ugochukwu D. Ejikeonye; Ogunyemi and Umeh of ambivalence and misguided European feminist, should be commended for not only speaking of herself as an African womanhood. In this review, Ward tries to promote the identity of Emecheta’s women characters in particular and African women in general. This parity drawn by Ward forms a useful basis for the hypothetical question that this research work hopes to answer, that is to know whether the African woman as seen through the female protagonists of Buchi Emecheta’s works is oppressed or not.

In another critical opinion, Osayimwense Osa in *African Children and Youth Literature* describes Aku-nna’s development in *The Bride Price* from her childhood to early adolescence. She highlights the different experiences that

⁷ Helene Chukwuma, “*Positivism and the Female Crisis, The Novels of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Female Writers: a Critical Perspective*. 1989; p: 2

Aku-Nna passes through and finally observes that her development is characterised by two traumatic experiences: the death of her father, and her subsequent movement from cosmopolitan Lagos into a conservative traditional village. Aku-Nna's plight in Okonkwo, her uncle's home is shown as being oppressive to Aku-Nna rather than just rivalry. Allusion here is made to refer to the antagonism of Okonkwo's wives and the gossip about her schooling in *The Bride Price* (P:28-29).

As far as the problem of preference of the male child over the female in Ibo society is concerned, Osa recognizes the fact that Aku-nna, the heroine of the *Bride Price* suffers a psychological oppression at home because she is a girl. Rather than being seen as self-imposed psychological torture, the discrimination between girls and boys has been examined as the root cause of such mental oppression.

Catherine Obianuju Acholonu in her thought on Buchi Emecheta's works traces the history of the female bondage. Beginning by *The Bride Price*, she concludes that the author points to the fact that at every moment in a woman's life she is always somebody's property. The inferior position of women as she asserts, can be linked to the activities of patriarchal society which continues to consider women as inferior to men through their oppressive activities.

Another relevant view on women's oppression is the one Teresa Derrickson of the University of Alaska Anchorage has. In her article entitled *Class, Culture and the Colonial Context: The Status of Women in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood*, Theresa Derrickson demonstrates that the hardships endured by women of Emecheta's novels do not emanate necessarily from oppressive cultural practices regarding women's roles in Ibo villages, but from a historical moment of political and economic transition in which the values and priorities of British culture clash destructively over the values and priorities of indigenous Africa.

Taking the example of *The Joys of Motherhood*, she analyses that the novel bears out the fact that this transitional period is particularly disastrous for African women. As the plight of the novel's main character reveals, colonialism is a costly reality for those who are forced to walk a fine line between that which is demanded of them by their village communities and that which is demanded of them by the rules of a European political regime. Actually her article traces the destructive influence of Western capitalism and its associated ideologies on the subsequent power and autonomy of Ibo women. Colonialism, she hopes to show, is a far greater threat to women's collective well-being than the strictures of the village patriarchy.

Indeed, set in the British colony of Nigeria in the 1930s, *The Joys of Motherhood* as she says details the life story of an Ibo woman named Nnu Ego who first escapes the ignominy of a childless marriage by fleeing to the distant city of Lagos to start anew with a second husband. Nnu Ego's simple dream of becoming a mother (a dream rooted in the cultural values of Ibo society, where motherhood is the primary source of a woman's self-esteem and public status) is happily realised several times over in this new setting. The pleasures associated with motherhood that the protagonist eagerly anticipates, however, are ultimately negated by the difficult economic conditions of her new urban environment. In short, she analyses, there are so few job opportunities for her husband to pursue that Nnu Ego spends her entire life giving birth to children and working out day by day as cigarettes seller to expel hunger and poverty that invariably haunt her household. As she analyses, the novel focuses on this gruelling battle, a battle that ends in a loss for Nnu Ego. As she witnesses, her beloved sons grow up and leave Nigeria for good and her daughters marry and move away. Nnu Ego's hopes of living out her final years in the company of her grandchildren disappear before she turns forty, and she dies at the side of a country road, alone and unnoticed.

The title “*The Joys of Motherhood*” of Emecheta’s novel as she analyses is clearly ironic, for it will seem that there are more miseries associated with motherhood than joys. And yet while that reality is certainly one message that the novel conveys, there is far more to the text than a critique of motherhood. The fact that Emecheta’s novel moves beyond this critique to explore the oppression of colonialism for women in urban Nigeria is summarised in a crucial passage midway through the novel in which Nnu Ego uttered a cry of despair:

God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage? She prayed desperately. After all, I was born a lone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? I have to work myself to the bone to look after them. I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul....⁸

This excerpt from the novel is very important in locating the source of Nnu Ego’s anguish in her position as a mother and a woman. She is asked to replace her husband and to assume his obligations within a new cultural setting engendered by colonialism which confers “none of the advantages” normally associated with such a labour. Nnu Ego is able to interpret the inequity of this exchange as something that “oppresses,” “enslaves” and imprisons her. She is also able to identify at least on some level, the political economy of colonial Lagos that proves to be unaccommodating of her traditional role as wife and as mother.

But the most outstanding view on women’s oppression is the one developed by Dr Coovi Innocent Datondji through one of his teachings at La Guardia Community College to help his ESL students have a better understanding of women in South and West Africa. Entitled “*Violence on*

⁸ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann, 1979, p:209-210,

women in the works of Buchi Emecheta”, Dr Coovi Innocent Datondji intends to examine how violence, whether physical or psychological has been exerted by male characters on their female counterparts in three of the author’s novels: *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood*. To better develop his view point, Dr Coovi Innocent Datondji begins by identifying two forms of violence one can exert on somebody. There are “the physical violence” and “the psychological violence” that he defines respectively as “any extremely forceful actions that are intended to hurt people” and “the effects some words and attitude of male characters may have on a female characters”. When I analyse closely these definitions of violence, whether physical or psychological, I can conclude that they are simply oppression which women are submitted to. That is why in this part of my research work I have pointed out the most significant circumstances in which violence, as understood in his study, has been exerted on women in the two novels the research work is concerned with in order to better analyse the consequences of such treatment on women’s status.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Dr Coovi Innocent Datondji depicts the oppression that Nnu Ego is submitted to by her first husband Amatokwu when he finds out that she fails to bear children for him. As the following lines witness:

She [Nnu Ego] was not surprised when Amatokwu told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife. My father is desperate. It is now known that your chi came from the people down by the river. Their women are said to be very strong. I am sorry; Nnu Ego, but I cannot fail my people⁹

Here is Amatokwu’s reaction to Nnu Ego’s supplication:

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 any more 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.¹⁰

⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann; 1979, p:30

¹⁰ Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*, p:31

Amatokwu's words "infertile"; "dry"; "scratched jumpy"; "nervy; "all bones" are strong enough to hurt Emecheta's character Nnu Ego psychologically. Such forms of violence as described abound in examples in *The Joys of Motherhood* when we go further in the book. This is how we are informed about how Nnu Ego's mother, Ona, has been treated harshly by her husband Agbadi during a sexual intercourse that she screamed so piercingly. As we can read: "Agbadi, you are splitting me into two!"¹¹ For people who are familiar with "splitting fire wood" in the context of Africa, it is easier to understand the force and violence which characterize that activity. As we can also learn about Nnaife, Nnu Ego's second husband, his violent attitude toward Nnu Ego during a sexual intercourse that very night she has come to Lagos to join him is a form of oppression.

She had thought she would be allowed to rest at least on the first night after her arrival before being pounced upon by this hungry man, her new husband[...]this one worked himself into an animal passion ... this man's appetite was insatiable, and by the morning, she was so weary ... O, my dead mother, please make this dream come true, then I will respect this man, I will be his faithful wife and put up with his crude ways and ugly appearance.¹²

These two examples of violence on women during sexual contact are forms of oppression women are generally submitted to in African societies. When I have closely analysed these two practices, I have realised that violence on women as described here serves as a means of retaliation, of vengeance, or punishment by men on women. And this is no doubt how I can also interpret Agbadi and Nnaife's violent attitude on their lovers.

By the end of the book, as Dr Coovi Innocent Datondji points out, Nnu Ego has to go through two other major violence or oppression. The first one is

¹¹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London : Heinemann; 1979, p:20

¹² Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*, p: 44- 45

when her husband has married a young wife called Okpo. In fact, Nnu Ego has to support her co- wife's presence in the single room they share together with the children. Moreover, she has also to bear the psychological hurt caused by Okpo while having sex with their husband. Such a treatment is a form of oppression Nnu Ego is submitted to. The second type of violence Nnu Ego is submitted to is, when she has failed to hear from her two sons, Oshia and Adim, respectively in America and Canada. As this quotation shows:

[.....] what actually broke her was, month after month, expecting to hear from her son in America and from Adim too who later went to Canada, and failing to do so. It was from rumours that she heard Oshia had married and that his bride was a white woman.¹³

As in *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price* also exposes instances of violence on women according to Dr Coovi Innocent Datondji. However, the story here is smoother than the one I come across in *The Joys of Motherhood* and has to do with the kidnapping of Aku nna by a young man called Okobochi who wants to force her into marrying him. As she tries to resist him, he exerts violence on her. As it is described here,

The very next minute he was upon her, pulling her roughly by the arm, twisting the arm so much that she screamed in pain. He forces her onto the bed, still holding on to arm, which she felt going numb.... When she kicked him in the chest, he slapped her very hard, and she could smell the gin on his breath... The slap had been painful and she was bleeding inside her mouth.¹⁴

Such brutality exerted on Aku-nna by Okoboshi can have a harmful effect on her. As if this is not harmful enough, he continues insulting her in this way “get out of my bed, you public bitch! With this, he hit her so forcefully in the eye that she was sent reeling into the mud couch.”¹⁵ This behaviour of Okoboshi in the novel takes away from Aku- nna all her intelligence, all her love for Chike, as such that she has been able to run away from these peoples who

¹³ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann; 1979, p: 253

¹⁴ Buchi Emecheta, op.cit p:143-144

¹⁵ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, p:145

kidnap her and who want her to do as they please. Unfortunately, against every expectation, she dies, victim of psychological violence, because the bride price is not paid for her, as tradition demands.

As partial conclusion to this part of my study, I can say that all the sufferings of women as I witness here, all their frustration, all the struggles they go through, all the deprivations they experience, all the brutality exerted on them have been caused on the one hand by their male counterparts and on the other hand by the destructive influence of Western capitalism and its associated ideologies on the subsequent power and autonomy of Ibo women. The reading of the different articles written by researchers has shown that most of them have put a particular accent on these aspects of women's oppression. But another form of oppression the authors of these papers fail to point out is the one exerted on women by their female counterparts.

In fact the responsibility of women, especially mothers in the pains of their daughters is a hidden reality which exists in the two novels under study. As mentioned above, women contribute enormously to perpetuating conformism in society and the idea of inferiority of which they fall victims. If society continues to consider women as inferior beings and has been dominating them through successive generations, it is certainly because women go on reproducing the mechanism of their own domination. It seems that women's oppression by their female counterparts is to engrave in women's mind that they are born to be oppressed and to take the position of "second class citizens". It is this particular aspect of women's predicaments that I am interested in throughout this part of my literature review. I do not intend to do the genesis of African women's plights in general, but how women's oppression by women is often seen as the root cause of other forms of oppression. Women's oppression by women influences and conditions the position of African women in African society.

Indeed, mothers often cause their female children untold suffering during their childhood. The degree of suffering to a girl child at the hands of her mother is often justified by the kind of up-bringing she intends to give to her own girl child or female children under her care. This observation has been amply made by feminists like Flora Nwapa who states that “the oppression of the woman starts in the home”¹⁶ and Paulina Palmer who sees such role of a woman, especially the mother, as that of a tool of patriarchy (Palmer 1989, 102)

In *The joys of Motherhood*, one of the novels under study, there are instances that depict women as being the oppressors of their fellow women. As we can learn, Nnu Ego does not want her female children to continue school because “they (the twins) will have to leave and help her [Nnu Ego] in running the house and in her trade”¹⁷. Having so decided, one of the girls, Taiwo, grumbles at the household chores given to her and her twin sister Kehinde while the boys do nothing. She promptly tells her mother that “the boys can help too”. But Nnu Ego does not like to have her male children do menial household chores. As she replies: “They have to go to their lesson, Taiwo...you are girls, you know”¹⁸. This makes the girls so unhappy that at a moment like this, such girls curse the fact that they were born girls in a society that prefers boys to girls. Taiwo does not hide her disapproval of her mother’s preference as she answers back in bitterness, “I know that, mother. You remind us all the time”. In other words, the girl Taiwo is fed up with being reminded that she is not a boy and as such, must do housework all the time. Here again it is a mother who continues to keep her own daughter in perpetual unhappiness.

Additionally, Emecheta makes a point that is very important in the relationship between Ibuza mothers and their daughters. In fact, Iyawo Itsekri, one of Nnu Ego’s neighbour observes that Igbo people can virtually sell

¹⁶James Adeola, *In Their Own Voice, African Women Writers Talk. Ports Month*, Heinemann, 1990, P:113

¹⁷ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann; 1979, p:194

¹⁸Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*, p:195

anything to get money; even their own children. Nnu Ego's reply does not disapprove Iyawo's claim altogether especially as it relates to her female children. As she herself claims, although she does not intend to sell her children, she says: "I wouldn't mind sending the girls somewhere... if I would be given some money for their services."¹⁹ This once more shows a mother, ready to send her own daughters into slavery only if it will fetch her some money. The money, she maintains, will be very useful to her to take care of her other children. As we can read: "the money I'd get from them would help me in looking after others"²⁰. The word "others" no doubt, refer to the boys. This example shows that mothers will continue to oppress or subject their daughters to inhuman and degrading circumstances in order that they help to maintain the position of the man over the patriarchal society, unless the women themselves consciously assume a drastic position to change their circumstances.

Like in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in *The Bride Price*, Emecheta concentrates on the misunderstanding between Aku-nna and her mother and systematically makes the girl child realise the lack of bond between her and her mother. "Aku-nna knew that there was a kind of bond between her and her father which did not exist between her and her mother."²¹ This lack of bond between mother and daughter is the consequent result of all the oppressions that the girl child suffers at the hands of her mother in the home.

Similarly, this lack of bond between mothers and daughters graduates into a situation of betrayal. Aku-nna's father having died, she, her brother, and their mother move from Lagos to Ibadan where the mother is quickly inherited by their father's elder brother Okonkwo. Okonkwo, a handsome and strong man even in his old age easily gets Aku-nna's mother pregnant. She gives birth to a child that she has desired for several years. For the fact that her own personal interest

¹⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann; 1979, P: 196

²⁰ Buchi Emecheta, Idem, P: 196

²¹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976 p: 12

has been fulfilled, Ma Blackie betrays Aku nna who falls in love with a slave born called Chike. She sides with the entire household to reject Chike as an outcast even though she knows that her daughter's happiness depends on her marriage with Chike. For betraying her in this way, Aku- nna is said to have started to hate her mother: "...she began to hate her mother for being so passive about it all."²² The girl is disappointed in the mother because she and her brother use Chike's little presents of beverages and cans of milk and other sanitary gifts. She is surprised that her mother can suddenly join in the condemnation of Chike to the extent that "Ma Blackie cried and cursed her fortune in being saddled with such a daughter"²³ This outcry truly makes Aku - nna doubt the saying that "one's mother could be one's best friend."²⁴ In addition, she wonders if her mother has encouraged her to accept Chike's friendship just in order to use him like a convenient tool, to support them in a difficult period of adjustment. This realization brings to Aku-nna great bitterness, which is said to have gone beyond tears. Girls' oppression by their mothers is therefore an important aspect in a girl child developmental life because as she grows up in the home with her mother or other women, she gets to feel her first bitterness from the activities of the mother or whoever it is that plays the role of mother to her.

²² Buchi Emecheta, Idem, p:120

²³ Buchi Emecheta, Idem, p: 125

²⁴ Buchi Emecheta, Ibid, p:126

This part of my research work has tried to demonstrate to what extent African women are oppressed. There are different forms of oppression to which women are submitted to. The two novels under study have also amply portrayed the sad reality that the girl child generally gets her first oppression from the home and at the hand of her mother with whom she lives. The mere fact that African women writers like Emecheta and others have reflected these poignant insights into the powers of women and have unveiled the origin of women's oppression makes it all the more authentic.

Overviews of the chapters

This research work is divided into four chapters. Apart from the front matters (Foreword, Dedication and Acknowledgements) as well as the Introduction, and the Back matters (notes, and the annotated bibliography) as well as the conclusion, as it is shown in the Table of Contents, four chapters constitute the present dissertation. Chapter 1 deals with the author and her novels. Chapter 2 discusses the social status of women in African societies. Here, I have studied women's status through some customary practices, and through marriage and family life. I have come to the conclusion that certain customary practices give women a good position in African societies. Women benefit from many prerogatives which symbolise their status. It is in these particular chapters that I make reference to *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* where the status of African women is at stake. Through their main characters respectively Aku-nna and Nnu Ego, Buchi Emecheta denounces the unhappy position made to African women. Many readers who are familiar with Emecheta's own life posit that the bulk of her work is autobiographical. That is why the theme of the status of women is extensively discussed by the author

herself in her novels. Chapter 3 makes a strong case of some practices against women's status in the novels under study and chapter 4 makes suggestions to improve women's status. In the next chapter, I have studied the personality of Buchi Emecheta in order to see whether I can establish a relationship between her and the protagonists of her novels.

Chapter I THE AUTHOR AND HER NOVELS

1-1 Buchi Emecheta and the protagonists in her novels

Florence Onye alias Buchi Emecheta is a Nigerian novelist. She is from Ibuza in Igbo land (the Igbo are one of Nigeria's main ethnic groups which have created highly developed city states and even empires before the arrival of Europeans to conduct a thriving slave's trade in the fifteenth century) in the East of Nigeria. She is considered as one of her country's most distinguished literary names. For having been born in colonial period, the destiny of Emecheta is shaped by colonial economy. She is Jeremy Nwabudinke and Alice Okwuekuhe's daughter. Both her parents come from Ibuza and move to Lagos in search of work. As both of them are partly educated by missionaries, they have embraced the C.M.S. (Church Missionary society) way of life. But being of the old Ibo kingdom, they make sure that young Buchi Emecheta and her brother never lose sight of life in Ibuza. They want them to learn the rigorous Ibo life. So, they work at home during the rainy season to help on farm and to learn their ways.

Emecheta's father has been a railway worker. Due to the gender bias, young Buchi Emecheta is initially kept at home while her younger brother is sent to school; but after persuading her parents to consider the benefits of her education, she has attended girl's missionary school. Her father dies when she is nine years old and she has won a scholarship to the Methodist Girls' Secondary School where she has remained until the age of sixteen. But by the time she is seventeen, she has to leave school in order to get married to Sylvester Onwordi and have a child. She accompanies her husband to London where he has been a student. At the time, she is only eighteen.

In London, Buchi Emecheta has faced a great many troubles. Her husband's lack of ambition has forced her to work outside the home. Though her

English language skills are still lacking; she is determined to improve them and to write in spite of her five children. Her first attempt to write is resented by her husband who has burnt the first manuscript of a book called *The Bride Price*. By 1966, her marriage has disintegrated and she has left her husband and found herself unmarried at twenty-two with five children. She realizes that writing may provide a more stable income for her and her five children. As she has pointed out in *Criticism and Ideology*,

I am just an ordinary writer, an ordinary writer who has to write because if I don't write, I think I would have to be put in asylum. Some people have to communicate, and I happen to be one of them. ... I thought I would wait to be as old as my Big Mother with a string of degrees before writing. But I had to earn my living and the only thing I could do was write²⁵

So, she enrolls at the University of London, has got a diploma in Sociology and starts writing a column about the African / London experiences for *The new Statesman*. Her essays about the culture shock she has experienced, her failing marriage, racism in London, and her struggles as working mother of five children are collected in her first book *In the Ditch*

In the 1980's Buchi Emecheta has returned to Nigeria and has briefly taught at the University of Calabar. She founds with her sons a small publishing company (the Ogwugwu Afor) in London which produces some of her own works. As a matter of fact, she is a prolific writer. She says of her career as a novelist in *Criticism and Ideology Paper*:

²⁵ Kirsten Holst Petersen, *Criticism and Ideology, Second African Writers' Conference* 1986 P: 173

I have been writing ever since, and I am now living on my writing. ... I am not doing anything particularly clever. I am simply doing what my mother was doing for free thirty years ago. The only difference is that she told her stories in the moonlight, while I have to bang away a typewriter I picked up from Woolworth in London.²⁶

Buchi Emecheta is still alive and has taught in many universities around the world, namely in the United States of America and England. Early in her career, Emecheta's work establishes a name for its women-centred perspectives and determined focus on the leading female characters' spirited struggle for survival; she is concerned about the fate of women and particularly the African women's fate, often against the pressures of patriarchal and colonial tradition. Many of her reflexions in her novels are the expression of her own life and the lives of other women close to her. Through the events of her own life, she denounces the oppressions imposed on African girls or women.

Buchi Emecheta's first book *In the Ditch* details her experience as a poor, single parent in London. Novels such as *The Bride Price* and *Destination Biafra* present dynamic, and hardworking female characters whose actions often bring them into conflict with irresponsible male counterparts whom they succeed either in defeating or evading, even if gradually. For her apparent tendency to stereotype gender relations, and men in particular, Emecheta has at times drawn sharp criticism (and this despite her fierce disavowal of feminism as it is expressed in the western middle-class formations that predominated in the 1960s and 1970s.) She doesn't deal with great ideological issues. She writes about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, she often sees things through an African woman's eyes. She chronicles the little happenings in the life of the African women. She says that she doesn't know that by doing so she deserves to be called a feminist. "But If I am now a feminist, she insists, I am an African feminist, or, on another occasion, a feminist with a small f".

²⁶Kirsten Holst Petersen, Idem. P: 174

In fact, Emecheta's feminist call is for women to work together to challenge the economic and social institutions that destroy bodies and spirits. She rejects the life-affirming aspects of traditional African culture which make women suffer. In her books, she writes about families because she still believes in families. She writes about women who try very hard to hold their family together until it becomes absolutely impossible. She has no sympathy for a woman who deserts her children; neither does she for a woman who insists on staying in a marriage with a brute of a man. She simply wants women to be respectable. She wants African women to further their education because she knows that education really helps them. It helps them to read and it helps them to rear a generation too. She approves the saying that "if one educates a woman, one educates a community, whereas if one educates a man one educates only a man."

Despite the political and economic instability of her country Nigeria in the period when most of her novels are set, she has successfully described the clash that occurs when the modern world encroaches upon indigenous African values in her novels. Actually, African societies and particularly the Nigerian society where these novels are set are crossing both the traditional and modern values. Such cohabitation is characterised by great difficulties in the everyday life of African people. So she depicts this and convinces through plain narrative authenticity and feeling for her characters.

She writes *Second Class Citizen* (1974) followed by *The Slave Girl* (1976) which is awarded the Jock Campbell Award; *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) has long stood as an acclaimed classic of modern African fiction, then come *Destination Biafra and Naira Power* (1982); *Double Yoke* (1983); *The Rape of Shavi* (1984); *Gwendolen* (1989); *Kinhinde* (1994); and *The New Tribe* (1999) as well as a number of children's books and two plays, *A Kind of Marriage*, produced on BBC television and *Juju Landlord*, produced by Granada.

Her autobiography is, *Head Above Water* (1986). But I must mention that most of her works are more or less autobiographical in nature. So, *In the Ditch*, *Second-class citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Head Above Water* and *Double Yoke* are telling examples where a great many passages are related to the author's own life, making them an autobiography. Through the heroines of these different novels, we notice that it is part of Emecheta's life which is unveiled. The other works including the *Rape of Shavi* and *Destination Biafra* are imaginary works based on ideas and ideals. In *The Rape of Shavi*, Emecheta has hope for all of us; that is to say that, not only will the nuclear war be a non-starter, but the white European woman from the North will also regard the black woman from the south as her sister and that both of them together will hold hands and try to salvage what is left of our world from the mess the sons they have brought into it have made. Although fictional, these books draw on the events Emecheta has witnessed.

A close analysis of the story of *The Bride Price*, one of the books under study, clearly shows some links with its author. Indeed, Buchi Emecheta doesn't choose a female protagonist in this novel at random, but it has been done on purpose. Aku-nna, the heroine of the novel incarnates Buchi Emecheta herself. Like Aku-nna, Buchi Emecheta also has lost her father when she is still very young. This part of Emecheta's life is seen through the death of Ezekiel Odia, Aku-nna's father, who is a railway worker as well. This tragedy happens when Aku-nna is still a teenager. The parallel is easy to establish between the author and the protagonist of *The Bride Price*. Both Emecheta and Aku-nna have lost their father when they are teenagers.

Besides, another conspicuous element is the marriage of both Emecheta and Aku-nna. They have got married very young in a society where such a practice is customary and encouraged. So, like Aku-nna, Emecheta also has suffered from such a practice when she gets married at seventeen with Sylvester.

Through the sorrow and sadness of *Aku-nna*, it is Buchi Emecheta's life that is revealed with a few changes here and there. Beyond *Aku-nna*'s predicaments, it is the author's ordeal that are unveiled and furthermore the life of many women around her. Buchi Emecheta, through this novel calls our attention to the type of life she has been through as a little girl in her native Nigeria and particularly in Ibuza. In fact, Ibuza where most of her stories are set is not a fictional village. Actually, it is the author's village. Ibuza where *Aku-nna* and her family are living and struggling against some aspects of their tradition is Buchi Emecheta's village; it is where she learnt the Ibo tradition while she was a teenager. Ibuza is not a fictional village; the author chooses a place she knows quite well and where her parents used to send her in her childhood in order to learn the rigorous Ibo life and to gradually feel the tradition of her ethnic group. Most of the places where her stories are set are places the author knows well for being born in Nigeria and near Lagos.

In *The Bride Price*, Buchi Emecheta talks about arranged marriage. She talks about the inferiority of women and violence on women like the one she has experienced when she is still married to her first husband who regards her as a second-class citizen. As a consequence, he fights tooth and nail to put an end to her studies. In the same way, the heroine of *The Bride Price* also suffers from the same miseries. Indeed, like Emecheta herself with Francis Onwordi her first husband, *Aku-nna* also suffers some insults from the man who wants to be her first husband. He labels her as:

Nothing but a common slut, fit to be kicked around and spat upon by slaves, because in her incarnation she had been a slave carrier, only good enough to be given to gorillas for them to sleep with. She was not a human being but a curse to all human beings²⁷.

Beside, as Francis Onwordi tried to prevent Buchi Emecheta from furthering her studies, Okoboshi Obidi in *The Bride Price* wants to prevent Aku-nna from her plan to further her studies by marrying her by force though she is willing to continue her schooling and earn her living.

As a whole, *The Bride Price* is about Buchi Emecheta's life. After her father's death, a railway worker, she is obliged to get married almost at the same age as the main character of the novel does. Through this novel, Emecheta aims at drawing our attention to her early marriage and some aspects of her own life when she is still a little girl in Nigeria.

As for *The Joys of Motherhood* the second novel under study, it has been called Buchi Emecheta's outstanding novel. Beyond the power of characterization, manipulation of point of view and narrative method, the novel offers a sustained exploration of an African woman's experience: her devotion to her children, all her investment in them and the expectations attached to the roles of mother and wife in African culture. With the critical portrait of Nnu Ego, Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* stands as an acclaimed classic of modern African fiction. Though it does not necessarily established a parallel between the author and its protagonist, the novel serves as avenue through which Buchi Emecheta assesses the status of African women. Nnu Ego, the protagonist of the novel, is seen as the perfect example of African woman. Her experiences and responses to her world are thus perceived as ideal representations of African women's existence and as an expression of a culture in which women have little control over their lives.

²⁷ Buchi, Emecheta *The Bride Price*, London : Heinemann, 1976, p:145

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta depicts the arranged marriage, the Igbo society practices of polygamy and bride price; she criticises the perpetual subjugation of women, the fact that girls and boys don't have the same opportunities. The list of evils that she accuses society of heaping on its women is long. And she does this with accuracy because as a Nigerian-born novelist, she has experienced all these predicaments of her ethnic group as women. At this point, Palmer states:

Like her countryman Chinua Achebe, the well-known pioneer in the field, most of Emecheta's novels give detailed presentations of life in traditional Igbo society. But unlike some other Igbo novelists who have imitated Achebe in this regard, Emecheta's presentation of traditional Igbo society compels attention because of its refreshing differences of emphasis and attitude. Although Achebe occasionally implies that traditional society had its weaknesses and should have been more responsive to the forces of change, his general attitude is one of profound reverence. This is in line with his aim of demonstrating to his people and the world the beauty, dignity, and validity of indigenous culture. Emecheta's attitude to traditional society, on the other hand, is one of profound cynicism. It is possible to explain this as the reaction of an alienated "been to" that spent eighteen years (about half of her life) in Britain. It seems much more plausible, however, that her scepticism towards traditional society as one of forces encouraging the degradation of women.²⁸

The truth is that these presentations of African women in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* as victims, greatly contrast with existing anthropological and sociological works on African women. Because Emecheta's novels are set in Igbo society, should we then assume that Emecheta speaks for all African women or those particular female characters in her novel? Many scholars, both natives and non-natives, who have carefully studied traditional African culture, present African women not as breeds, slaves beasts of burden, or commodities to be sold, but as human beings living vibrant and fulfilled lives and playing essential roles in the political, social and economical lives of their communities.

²⁸ Palmer, Eustace. "A Powerful Female Voice in the African Novel: Introducing the Novels of Buchi Emecheta." *New Literature Review* 11 (Nov. 1982); p: 21-23.

They have written about the dual sex political systems of pre-colonial Igbo society that gives women the freedom to organise themselves, manage their own affair and participate actively in decision making-processes within their own families and the greater community.

1-2Theplot of the novels under study

Both *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) are post colonial novels dealing with African realities and different issues as a whole. They highlight matters inherent to Africa and particularly Nigeria. *The Bride Price* is set in Nigeria. It is a love story between Aku-nna and Chike, two young people as I have said above. The bone of contention in *The Bride Price* is marriage. Aku-nna and Chike are very angry with their parents because of the issues of marriage in a society regulated by multiple laws. Before giving further details about the subject, it is worth mentioning the way marriage is seen in most African societies.

Indeed, marriage is a very important social institution in Africa. It is not simply the union of the two people in love but a bond between two different families. In Africa, parents are considered as the incarnation of wisdom that is why they are reserved the right to choose a partner for their offspring according to the traditional laws at stake in their society. This is to avoid errors and remorse in the future for the two people and a way to keep one's good reputation in the society. No one is allowed to betray this tradition. So, in traditional Africa marriage is not based on the feelings of the two people in love but the agreement of two families. It is such a situation which is prevailing in *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta.

Aku-nna is living a peaceful life in Lagos with her family until the day her father, Ezekiel Odia, dies leaving behind two orphans and a widow. The sudden death of the bread-winner has compelled the family to leave Lagos for their

village Ibuza. Aku-nna and her brother Nna-nndo, who have been living in city, are from that time on confronted with the reality of the village life; her own village with its tradition. As it is the case in most African societies, Okonkwo, Ezekiel Odiá's elder brother should inherit his younger brother's entire property. As a matter of fact, he has become Ma Blackie's husband and Aku-nna's father. The young girl does not know that her so-called father Okonkwo is aiming at marrying her to a wealthy husband. In order to satisfy his greedy desire that is to be an Obi.

In fact, Okonkwo is thirsty for fame and glory; he wants to be among the most respected and noted men of Ibuza. But he does not possess the necessary amount of money to fulfil his dream. The only solution left to him is to take a high bride price from Aku-nna's marriage; which means imposing on her a rich husband who will afford a sufficient sum of money. He states it clearly in the following passage where he discloses his aim to his sons:

You cannot see beyond your noses, said Okonkwo. You are too young. Don't you know I hope to become an Obi and take the title one day? In order to become an Obi and receive the respected Eze title, a man must make a big and expensive sacrifice to the gods. Then he was given the red cape those who achieved this rank of chieftaincy were entitled to wear, and the occasion was followed by days of heavy feasting and drinking...
"well, what has that got to do with Aku-nna?" Iloba asked.
"Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to m
You see the trend today is that the educated girls fetch more money."²⁹

These explanations given by Okonkwo to his sons enable them to understand the main reason why their father allows Aku-nna to continue her schooling; she will fetch an expensive dowry due to her state of educated girl in a society where nearly no girl attends school. The fact that Aku-nna attends school is a great achievement which deserves a heavy dowry for Okonkwo contrary to his illiterate daughter Ogugua. Indeed unlike Okonkwo's own children, Aku-nna

²⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976, p:75

and her brother are attending school at the local missionary school. None of Okonkwo's sons, however, has showed any interest in school. According to them, school is a place where only the slaves' family are sent and not a place for the children of a free born man. That is why they show no interest in it. By evoking such a subject here, Buchi Emecheta is highlighting another aspect of marriage in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria where parents nearly sell their daughters in exchange of a heavy dowry. Thus, from the symbol that it has in the traditional society, the dowry has become under the weight of economic and financial problem a real transaction based on a very high sum of money. As Okonkwo is planning to do, "Aku-nnais going to marry a rich man and raise the entire Odia family from poverty to wealth." ³⁰

For Okonkwo, both Aku-nna and Ogugua are his source of wealth but especially Aku-nna, meaning "father's wealth", is more important for him. She will marry a wealthy man and raise the entire Odia family from poverty. But caught in the web of tradition, Aku-nna falls in love with Chike, her teacher. The young educated girl does not want to accept the so called tradition which gives right to parents to impose a husband on their daughters. Aku-nna thinks that such a tradition is appalling and inhuman. Her unexpected decision to marry Chike Ofulue, her teacher at the Church Missionary School is considered by the villagers as an abomination. As it is stated in the book, "for a girl from a good family to marry the descendant of a slave would be an abomination, ife alu." ³¹

In fact, Chike is the son of a rich family known all over Ibuza as a family of intellectuals. But the problem is that, the Ofulues are of slave origin and as such no decent girl from a good Ibuza family is allowed to associate with him; which means that any father would rather prefer to see his daughter dead than allow such a relationship. Nevertheless, Aku-nna and Chike have made up their mind

³⁰ Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*, p:77

³¹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976, p:113

to break such a taboo. They cannot allow the threats of such a taboo to prevent them from loving each other. But, though Aku-nna is forbidden by the members of her family; and Chike warned not to bring shame to the Ofulues by marrying a free born girl like Aku-nna against the laws of the village, the two young men have insisted and have married each other. This situation has brought an atmosphere of malaise in both families and in the village as a whole. Aku-nna is even led to judge her society in these words: “Oh, what kind of savage custom was it that could be so heartless and make so many people unhappy”.³²

As for Chike Ofulue, he also rejects with scorn a tradition which regards him and his whole family as social outcasts. Chike cannot accept such a thing. So, to challenge the tradition, he is determined to marry the free-born girl Aku-nna contrary to his other brothers and parents who can never dare to court girls in Ibuza. For Chike there should not be any obstacle to his ambition. He is determined to face any hardship owing to the fact that he is considered as an outcast. It is at the heart of this struggle that Aku-nna is kidnapped one night by some strong men to become Okoboshi’s new bride. Despite her imprisonment in Okoboshi’s house, she succeeds in escaping with his lover to Ughelli, a small town in the mid-west region of Nigeria, where Chike has a friend. The escape is planned in agreement with chike’s father who hopes that Okonkwo will be obliged to accept the high bride price the Ofulues have offered. But against their expectation Okonkwo has refused the huge dowry. Not only does he refuse, but he has also decided to avenge himself by killing the little girl who has challenged him and has caused him such a big insult. Meanwhile, Aku-nna has become pregnant. According to their tradition, the woman must die at child birth if the bride price is not paid. Unfortunately, this is what happens to Aku-nna while she is delivering her daughter that Chike has promised to call Joy in

³² Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*; p:126

accordance with her mother's wish. Thus, the love story ends in a tragedy with the death of Aku-nna. In a larger context, one can see Aku-nna's death as one of redemption- redeeming the woman's lot. A key to such a reading is the word Joy, and before Aku-nna's death, Chike promises her that the baby girl shall be called Joy

As for *The Joys of Motherhood*, It is set in colonial Nigeria from the early twentieth century through World War II. Juxtaposing the rural community of Ibuza with the urban, increasingly Westernized centre of Lagos, Emecheta explores the effects of imperialism on traditional Igbo life and the condition of women

The Joys of Motherhood is the story of Nnu Ego; a West African woman who makes devastating choices and sacrifices her health in the pursuit of failed traditions. She devotes herself to her children, giving them all her life. While reading the novel, one can see Nnu Ego not as an object on which society heaps its "unfair practices and demands, but as a subject of her own actions, as an active determinant of her own destiny.

The novel opens with a powerful but disturbing description of its heroine, Nnu Ego. The reader is presented with the image of a woman in despair, suffering both mental and physical agony at the death of her first child by a second marriage. As we can read:

Nnu Ego backed out of the room, her eyes unfocused and glazed, looking into vacancy. [....]She ran as if she would never stop. Her baby[...] her baby! Nnu Ego's arms involuntarily went to hold her aching breasts, more for assurance of her motherhood than to ease their weight. She felt the milk tricking out, wetting her bubu blouse; and the choking pain got heavier, nearing her throat, as if determined to squeeze the very life out of her there and then. But, unlike the milk this could not come out, though it urged her on, and she was running, running away from it. Yet it was inside of her. There was only one way to rid herself of it. For how would she be able to face the world after what had happened? No, it was better not to try. It was best to end it all this way, the only good way.³³

³³ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann, 1979, p : 1, 2

With such a portrait of Nnu Ego, we can say that *The Joys of Motherhood* is an elaborate exploration of what goes wrong with Nnu Ego. It has been said that Nnu Ego's sense of disequilibrium is the result of the contrasts between two worlds in conflicts; that is the old world, and the new world. The old world represented by the village life in Izu is one in which men romance their wives, women support their family through farming, family ties are strong and emotional, and financial support is abundant. The new world represented by life in Lagos is tiring. There is no room for extended family support, no land to be owned or cultivated, and women have to enter the world of trade to find money. The novel states that Nnu Ego is sent to Lagos to find peace, as a last act of redemption. But once in Lagos, the traditionally-raised Nnu Ego must deal with many changes. Not only must she submit to a second husband she finds repulsive, but she must also adjust to a way of life that denies male and female complementarities, restricts her to the private sphere, and condemns her to a life of extreme poverty, malnutrition and back-breaking work.

In fact, when Nnu Ego fails to conceive during several months of her first arranged marriage with Amatokwu, the neighbouring tribe quickly finds him a second wife. Without a child Amatokwu finds Nnu Ego sexually undesirable, good only for harvesting yams like a common labourer. She is ill-treated before being repudiated. Nnu Ego returns to her father's compound considering her marriage with Amatokwu as a failure. She suffers tremendous physical and psychic hardships before her father makes another arrangement of marriage with the Owulum. Some days later, after the arrangement has been made, Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father introduces the decision he has arrived at to his daughter before she is sent to her new husband in Lagos.

Although Nnu Ego's consciousness and point of view dominate the novel, Buchi Emecheta provides the reader with other ways of seeing Nnu Ego by

juxtaposing her ideology of self with those of other women around her, specifically her mother Ona; her co-wife Adaku; and the collective voices of the community women. These women make choices different from Nnu Ego's. Like her, they grew up in the so-called patriarchal society of Ibuza. But unlike her, they have enough foresight and self-realization to know that life is much more than following traditions and doing what is expected of one. The difference between the choices that Nnu Ego and Adaku make is evident in narrative. Both women find themselves in similar circumstances, with an inept husband and ever-present poverty. Adaku chooses to leave and forge a life for herself and her daughters. Nnu Ego stays because she assumes that it is what society expects from her. But perhaps the most vivid contrast is between Nnu Ego and her mother Ona. Though Emecheta dedicates only one chapter to Ona, it is enough to present a portrait that contrasts greatly with that of her daughter.

One of these mistresses (Ona) was a very beautiful young woman who managed to combine stubbornness with arrogance. So stubborn was she that she refused to live with Agbadi. Men being what they are, he preferred spending his free time with her, with his woman who enjoyed humiliating him by refusing to be his wife. Many a night she would send him away, saying she did not feel like having anything to do with him, even though Agbadi was not supposed to be the kind of man women should say such things to. But she refused to be dazzled by his wealth, his name or his handsomeness. People said that Nwokocha Agbadi spent all his life on courting his Ona.³⁴

Unlike Nnu Ego, Ona is aggressive. The picture the passage paints is that of a woman who thinks against tradition for her own self-fulfilment. Ona, unlike

³⁴ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann, 1979, p :6

Nnu Ego, knows that a woman does not need a man to be complete. Ona makes that notion very clear to Agbadi before her death. Ona's desire and hope for her daughter are that she is given the opportunity to have a life of her own. In other words, Ona wants Nnu Ego to be master of her own fate, the subject of her actions rather than an object of other people's actions and decision. Her father also makes it clear to her when she returns from Amatokwu's house that she does not need to be married to be accepted, that she is always welcome in her father's house. Presented with these opportunities, for self- realisation and with the example of her mother, Nnu Ego still opts for life that becomes a nightmare.

In making her choice, Nnu Ego not only fails herself and her mother, she also fails other women in the community. One of Nnu Ego's mistakes is that during times of personal crises she rejects the help and comfort that the other women in the community offer her. Solidarity among African women is a long-standing avenue of survival for women. But Nnu Ego, in her obsessive pursuit of motherhood refuses the offers of assistance and grace given to her. She finally dies by the wayside, hungry and alone without the attendance of any child.

In the same book, Emecheta describes how jealous Nnu Ego is when her husband has married a new wife. Instead of going to bed on the first night Agbadi brought Okpo, she stays awake listening to the noise made by her husband and the new wife in love making. She learns only a few days later that it will be better and to their mutual advantage, if she and the new wife have become friends rather than quarrel over their shared husband. They have soon become so busy in their everyday life that sexuality is pushed into the background.

Emecheta also writes in *The Joys of Motherhood* about polygamy. In many cases, polygamy can be liberating to the woman. According to Buchi Emecheta, it encourages a woman to value herself as a person and look outside

her family for friends. It gives her freedom from having to worry about her husband most of the time and each time he comes to her. He has to be sure that he is in good mood and that he is washed and clean and ready for the wife, because the wife has now become so sophisticated herself that she has no time for a dirty mood husband. And this is a strange way that makes them enjoy each other.

CHAPTER II THE SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Women's status in African societies has been a subject of great interest for the early European investigators who come in Africa. The early explorers ponder on what they have seen of African womanhood. So have the missionaries who move little closer to these women. Following the missionaries, anthropologists attempt more objective and scientific investigations. Despite the wide interest and the attempts made at studying women in African communities, the various investigators find it difficult to confirm the existence of African women's status; their place, their inner feelings, their conflicting responsibilities and how they have managed to make contributions to a cultural heritage which Africa upholds. Two conclusions evolve as a result of the series of these investigations.

According to the first conclusion, the African woman is a minor actor with little or no status, subject to the authority of men, at one time as her father and at another as her husband. The idea that the bride price is the price for the woman gives more support to this view.

The second conclusion is more recent and confirms women's status through their independent initiative and creativity in the day-to-day running of their home, as well as the strength of character demonstrated in the performance of roles outside their home. Unfortunately, the first conclusion seems to have gained more ground than the more recent one especially in job matters. There should be nothing like equality with men and power of women because according to early explorers they do not exist. This is very unfortunate, because it explains the lack of good understanding of our own society. It will require a lot of efforts and very strong women's organizations to change this wrong idea and re-establish that apart from assuming domestic services, women have left

very important marks in their different communities which confirm the existence of their status.

Many legends in Africa tell the glory of some historical characters. But unfortunately, most of them are told orally and very few writings exist on the subject. However, some examples remain and resist in time. Women have held positions of authority and power of control in traditional Africa. There are women leaders of their own groups, women kings, powerful queen mothers and princesses who have exercised influence. This influence first starts in the family. The smallest unit in the traditional social structure is the nuclear family. At this level, women have authority and power perceptible in different ways. At the level above this, that of the extended family in which so many individuals are involved, the eldest woman has a lot of authority just like the eldest man, known as the head of the family unit. Together with men, they exercise authority during ceremonies and rituals, and over all properties except land. At a further level, that of a compound, the exercise of authority is enlarged and involves control over all the compounds of a ward or village. This break down is just to show that within the smallest units in the traditional structure, women are part of the system and contrary to popular opinion, they are active and powerful. African history is replete with stories of women who excel as leaders. The case of Madame Tinubu, a historical character from Nigeria is a vivid example. Madame Tinubu is from Owu in Abeokuta Division of the Western State. She has featured prominently in trade, politics and the general welfare of her people. Tinubu square in Lagos and Lyalode square in Abeokuta are mementos to her name.

Another example of historical character is the one of queen Pokou in Ashanti ethnic group. She deserves her place as head of a kingdom and political leader by giving priority to her people's future to the detriment of her own family's. Thus, when the time has come to make a sacrifice in order to save her people, she does not hesitate. She courageously sacrifices her only son in order

to safely wade across a dangerous river as this is the only way for her to save her people.

Women's roles as creators and guardians of the tradition are characterized by motherhood, and participation to different ceremonies of the clan. Women have been co-leaders, co-achievers, co-governors working side by side with men. According to Yoruba myth, men and women are given control of the world. None of the genders is expected to ignore or relegate the other as this may cause serious problems. Women were respected because of the very important and noble roles they play in society. Those roles are complementary to those of men. African women know their rights and their privileges under the system. They are not subject to any conflicts because the system has no room for major conflicts of roles. African women are strong economic actors who work hard in the interest of their family and the group which they belong to. Neither polygamy, nor the bride prices are regarded as degrading factors, but they are rather seen as social safeguards which uphold women's status.

Education in traditional Africa aims at developing respect for oneself through one's family and parents. It is also partly a physical training. Africans understand that a sane mind dwells in a sane body. So, through oral literature, wisdom is taught to children especially to girls through cultural values to prepare them carry out marital responsibilities. Such values later give them prestige and a good status in society. In the next section of this research work, I have studied how girls are initiated to customary practices.

2-1 Women's status through customary practices

Customary practices are our different endogenous values. They are practices that both men and women undergo in traditional society. These customs give women prestige and good position in societies. Among these customs we have:

- The naming ceremonies. They are performed a few weeks after the child's birth. They permit to introduce the new born baby into its family and to socialize it.
- Infant betrothal. It consists to get engaged for marriage a boy and a girl since their childhood. The main purpose of such a practice is to make the two individuals familiar with each other and bind their families.
- Excision. Like many other social customs, excision is practiced in some societies because these societies feel it to be respectable and honourable. The practice consists in removing the girl's genitals and leaving its skin smooth though this is not recommended medically. It is thought by some people to improve their appearance and hygiene on the one hand. On the other hand, it reduces women's sensitivity who should be predisposed to be faithful to their husbands. Socio-culturally speaking, the flow of blood during excision (as well as circumcision) symbolises the gratitude and homage that women and men pay to the earth from which they are descendants.
- Girls' virginity. It consists for the young girl to get married virgin; that is to say, without ever having sexual intercourse with a man. Such a state is a criterion for her to be honoured after marriage.
- Marriage is a ceremony by which a man and a woman become husband and wife. Marriage is an important practice which gives prestige to women in society.

- Widowhood. It is a state of a person whose husband or wife is dead. After the death of a man in traditional African society, his wife is kept in her family-in-law for a given period of time in order to perform different ceremonies related to her late husband. Such ceremonies are long, ruinous but very important. They value women who undergo them and enhance their status. It is after widowhood that follows the levirate.
- Levirate consists for the widow to get married to a member of her family-in-law. After the death of a man, his wife is inherited by one of the member of his family. Such a practice is highly valued in traditional society because it helps families to maintain the relationships between them. All these cultural values model traditional African women and prepare them for their numerous responsibilities in their families though some of them are negative.

Family is a basic and universal institution. Upon it is based the survival of every society. Family has its origin in the fact that human infant is born after nine months of gestation, a period during which the mother is hampered in her ability to provide for herself the necessary health care. So members of her family- in- law assist her and give her the first health care enabling her to recover from the tiredness due to childbirth. It is within this family where the baby is born that its training starts.

The full training of a child in the traditional setting first starts in the family and is a cooperative effort in which members in the extended family and those in the neighbourhood play their parts. However, it is the direct responsibilities of parents to give such training to children. This is a long process which starts from infancy to adulthood and includes the different stages a woman goes through before marriage.

The first stage of such a process which values the girl and shows her womanhood as announced above is the naming ceremony. It is conducted in full

view of all the members of the extended family a few weeks after the child's birth. Though the ceremony has the same value of socialisation for both girls and boys, it is not carried out the same way. Generally, the girl is betrothed at birth to a boy older than her. At the naming ceremony the boy's parents give her lots of presents as symbol of their early betrothal. This is not the same with boys. Boys do not receive any presents at the naming ceremony. Such a practice gives prestige to the little girl and shapes the development of her woman personality. The early betrothal binds families and creates mutual confidence. Where the custom is observed, it is in rare cases that parents betroth their child to a person in whom they have no trust or confidence, and there lies the main importance of early betrothal in traditional Africa.

In this traditional Africa, girls as well as boys spend their childhood with their mother and are trained the same way. During this period of life, they are submitted to the same education. A child's early education, whether male or female, is solely given by the mother though there are exceptions. An instance of this exception is described in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* where Ona, Nnu Ego's mother, stays with her father whom she follows about everywhere. He (Ona's father) even maintains that she will never get married: "My daughter was never going to stoop to any man. She was free to have men, however, and if she bore a son, he would take her father's name, thereby rectifying the omission nature had made."³⁵ This means that girls are in perfect harmony with their father although they live with their mother.

Moreover, whatever their sex, children must take part in domestic chores such as fetching water and wood, sweeping, washing and cleaning. Oshia and Adim, Nnu Ego's male children in, *The Joy of Motherhood* are not exceptions to the rule. They also fetch wood for their mother. So does Taiwo, Nnu Ego's daughter. Among other domestic chores, Oshia and Adim must sell. They must

³⁵ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann, 1979, p : 7

also clean. These activities are not performed exclusively by girls. Thus, one day as Nnu Ego is going out, she instructs Oshia to sit by the stall while Taiwo goes to fetch woods. That makes Taiwo to know why she, and not her brother, is sent to fetch wood. As she pouts and says: “The boys have the evening off for their stupid lessons, and they’re let off from going to fetch wood that we have to sell to feed us”³⁶. Such reaction is to show her disapproval of her brothers being prevented from fetching wood. So, though housework is done by both boys and girls in traditional societies, there is a distinction between what each of them should do. Generally speaking, boys are educated to do difficult tasks whereas girls do the easier ones. There are certainly some chores common to both girls and boys. But what is pretty sure is that society makes a clear distinction between girls and boys for housework, and this distinction comes progressively through years.

As far as male adults are concerned, they are devoted to difficult tasks and are not concerned with cooking. Cooking is exclusively done by women who are helped either by their daughters or sons. Therefore, even if the boy should assist in domestic chores, cooking food has never been a male activity. This is what Oshia means when he is asked by Adaku, her father’s wife, to go and fetch water for evening meal: “I’m not going! I am a boy. Why should I help in the cooking? That’s a woman’s job. Oshia yelled back and went on playing with his friends”³⁷

Traditional Africa makes a clear distinction between activities of domestic sphere and those of public sphere. The former are associated with women and the latter with men. Because in most societies, women spend a good part of their life bearing and raising children, this keeps them more at home than in public affairs. It is the reason why until the time of her marriage, a girl lives in her mother’s hut and helps her all day long with her work in the house. Her mother

³⁶ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann, 1979, p: 176

³⁷ Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*, p: 143

instructs her and trains her and it is usually she who punishes her. This may include beating her on some rare occasions. There seems to be no line drawn between work and play, and it is with the greatest enjoyment in company of her sisters, half sisters, and her neighbours that the little girl learns how to look after babies, prepare food, work in the fields and fetch wood and water. She prepares herself for her role as mother both by playing with her doll and by looking after her young sisters and brothers. Whether betrothed or not she stays by her mother's side, learning the skills she will spend all her life in practicing, so, she follows her mother's steps, looking at what she is doing. By so doing she learns what her duties are, that is to say, be beautiful, work on her father's or husband's farm, cook, obey and venerate her husband, take care of his food, know when and how to satisfy his sexual needs; bear children, look after them, educate them; take care of the house and do all odd jobs in the house. The little girl becomes initiated to all these occupations which will keep her busy when she grows up, and particularly in the techniques practiced by her mother through humiliation, patience, calm and resignation.

Friendship and companionship play an important role at every stage in a woman's life. Every girl usually has her special friend whom she relies on in difficult moments and whose duties are quite specific. She trusts her, telling her secret experiences. It is she who advises her and supports her in difficult moments. Generally, women work for the perpetuation of societal realities that they have learned from their own parents. So, they are involved in the different kinds of initiation rites and stand as transmitters of traditional values. The young girl will come to an age when she performs the initiation rites which prepare her to adulthood. These rituals are supposed to confirm her femininity. They are done through the act of excision.

Excision like many other social customs is practised in some societies because these societies feel it to be respectable and honourable. The status of a

person who does not undergo the rituals of excision is questionable and quite often inferior. While the performance of these rituals gives the young girl a new social status and lends her prestige and consideration, a woman who fails to be excised is under-estimated and considered as an outcast. In certain societies, the worst insult imaginable is to refer to a woman as being “un-excised”. For, according to certain myths and beliefs, femininity is affirmed by this practice. Hence, someone who has not undergone these rituals cannot be considered as a fulfilled woman. To be considered as an accomplished woman and member of the community, excision is compulsory. In order to marry and have children, the girl must be excised. Owing to the importance of such a rite, parents are rarely opposed to it. On the contrary they encourage their daughters to undergo it. The following words of a mother, addressing her daughter in *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1976) by Ahmadou Kourouma clearly illustrate this:

Tu verras, ma fille: pendant un mois tu vivras en recluse avec d'autres excisées et, au milieu des chants, on vous enseignera tous les tabous de la tribu. L'excision est la rupture, elle démarque, elle met fin aux années d'impureté de jeune fille, et après elle vient, la vie de femme.³⁸

Excision signifies a radical change in the life of the young girl, who can henceforth consider herself as a fulfilled woman. Being excised implies a new status and, consequently, new responsibilities towards the community. The woman has to live up to a new code of conduct, commensurate with her new status. She is taught how to make contribution to cultural heritage, what attitude to keep in her family-in-law, and how to live in harmony with her husband. In best of cases, she is engaged to a man whom she gets married to. Otherwise she is underestimated and subject to forced marriage.

³⁸ Ahmadou Kourouma, *Les Soleils des indépendances* Paris: Seuil; 1976, pp. 34.

My own translation: “You will see my daughter: for a whole month you will live in seclusion with other excised girls and in the midst of songs, you will be taught the tribe’s taboos. Excision marks a break, it puts an end to years of ambiguity; to the impurity of a young girl, and afterwards, the life of a woman begins”.

2- 2 Women's status through marriage and family life.

Marriage is a ceremony by which a man and a woman become husband and wife. Marriage is an important social institution which gives prestige to women in society and enhances their status. The main reason for any marriage, particularly in African societies, is the preservation of the family. This is why our societies condemn prostitution because it endangers womanhood. Female respectability suffers a blow with prostitution on the one hand. On the other hand, embodied in the statement is the criticism of society which has double standards of morality for judging prostitutes and single women or men. Women especially are judged more harshly than men for being prostitutes or for not getting married. The way Nnu Ego has reacted in *The Joys of Motherhood* for example, when Adaku declares that she is going to be a prostitute like those women in Montgomery streets shows society's rejection of women's prostitution. As she shouts:

Stop! Stop! Don't forget that we have young girls sleeping in this room and don't you dare insult me by saying such things in my hearing. Which women are you talking about? You surely can't mean you are going to that kind of women? No Ibuza man will marry girls brought up by a prostitute.³⁹

This statement shows the criticism of society about prostitution and the importance attached to marriage in traditional African societies. In those societies traditional forms of marriage abound in great varieties, we can notice two different ways of getting married: a conventional and an unconventional way. But whatever the form it takes, marriage is contracted first in order to give a status to women.

³⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann, 1979 p: 188

The unconventional marriage is the one which is contracted in opposition to cultural norms and practices broadly accepted by society. Romantic love usually does not form the basis on which such marriage is contracted. Sometimes the man and the woman are scarcely acquainted to each other. In *The Bride Price*, Okoboshi gets married with Aku-nna in an unorthodox way by kidnapping her. So does Nwokocha Agbadi in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Nwokocha Agbadi was a very wealthy local chief. He was a great wrestler, and was glib and gifted in oratory. His speeches were highly spiced with sharp anecdotes and thoughtful proverbs. He was taller than most and, since he was born in an age when physical prowess determined one's role in life, people naturally accepted him as a leader. Like most handsome men who are aware of their charismatic image, he had married many women in this time. Whenever they raided a neighbouring village, Agbadi was sure to come back with the best-looking women. He married a few women in the traditional sense but as he watched them sink into domesticity and motherhood he was soon bored and would go further field for some other exciting, tall and proud females. This predilection of his extended to his mistresses as well⁴⁰.

The unconventional marriage doesn't obey the different steps of the conventional marriage. It includes the non payment of dowry, kidnapping of the bride or someone else wife who leaves her husband for another one. Such a marriage does not honour a woman who is compelled to leave her husband in such a way. But according to cultural norms this is not a divorce yet. For a divorce to be total the woman's family must return the bride price to the husband. On the contrary any child the woman will subsequently have may not be claimed by her new husband. This is why Agbadi has returned his daughter Nnu Ego's dowry after she has been beaten by her husband and sent home:

It was with pride that Nwokocha Agbadi returned the twenty bags of cowries to his former son-in-law and he even added a live goat as a token of insult. The goat was too tempting for Amatokwu to refuse, though by the time he

⁴⁰ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann, 1979, p : 5

sent people to thank his former -in - law, he learned that Nnu Ego had left for Lagos⁴¹.

As far as the conventional marriage is concerned, it involves engagement and different ceremonies for the dowry payment. But before the dowry is paid, there must be a negotiation between the groom and the bride's families. It is during this preliminary talks that the price is stated which is symbolic. The custom varies from place to place. But what is common to societies in Africa is the symbolism which surrounds the bride price. Families marry their daughters by taking a symbolic bride price. Such a practice is still kept up in some societies nowadays. It values women's status and shows that women are not for sale at marriage like merchandise. In *The Joys of Motherhood* the people of Ibuza do not intend to sell their daughter like merchandise. For example, for Nnu Ego's first marriage, her father has accepted the normal bride price which is twenty bags of cowries in reference to her name Nnu Ego which means money.

The people of Ibuza were never to forget the night the people of Umu-Iso came for Nnu Ego. Her father excelled himself. He accepted a normal bride price to show that he gave his blessing to the marriage⁴².

Marriage, as I have said above, is in traditional societies an agreement which does not involve only the bride and the groom. It involves the two families-in-law so that when conflicts arise they meet to reconcile the couple. The bride may reject a given proposition of marriage she is made and choose the person she wants. But most of the time parents secretly influence their daughters in the choice of their future husbands. They sometimes impose them because parents know that marriage is one of the main criteria for status allocation. This is illustrated in the conversation Agbadi and his friend Idayi have before Nnu Ego's second marriage. Talking to Agbadi, Idayi says:

⁴¹Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*, p : 39

⁴² Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Mother hood*, London: Heinemann, 1979; p : 28

_ there must be one family you favour among all these people coming to you?

_ Yes, my friend I would like her to marry into the Owuhim family, but the man in question is not in Ibuza. He is in a white man's job in a place they call Lagos...⁴³

It is after the effective payment of the dowry that marriage in African societies is said to be conventional. A girl who is married conventionally is overestimated and better respected in her family in – law than a girl who gets married in an orthodox way. She is honoured, so are her parents. The case of Ma Blackie in *The Bride Price* is a vivid example. Contrary to her daughter Aku-Nna who is kidnapped by Chike Ofulue with whom she runs away, Ma Blackie is married to Ezekiel Odia, Aku-Nna's father, with honour. He has even paid his family in –law a heavy bride price and has their marriage sanctified by Anglicanism. Such a marriage is said to be conventional.

Even after a conventional marriage the future spouses are not allowed to have sexual intercourse before the bride is sent to her husband. Custom requires that they remain chaste until they are together. A girl must be virgin on the day of her marriage. This is the greatest honour she can bestow upon the man she is marrying and upon her parents. This means that a girl's virginity is very important in African societies. And this is because societies attach great importance to girls' virginity before marriage. Such a state is a criterion for status allocation and the girl's parents are honoured by the groom's family. It is certainly the reason why Amatokwu hurries to send presents to Nwokocha Agbadi to congratulate him when her daughter is found virgin:

Agbadi's heart was full to bursting point when the second day the people from Amatokwu's compound came to thank him for giving them his precious daughter Nnu Ego. They did so with six full kegs of palm wine. Agbadi smiled contently and invited everybody in his own compound to drink⁴⁴.

⁴³Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London : Heinemann; 1979, p:36

⁴⁴ Buchi Emecheta, *Idem* , p : 29

So, the ideal thing for a girl to do in African societies is to get married virgin. The bride's virginity is known the very first night after she is sent to live with her husband. While going, she brings her "own dowry" which includes her own belongings. These are different from the bags of cowries and kegs of palm wine her family receives at the dowry ceremony. The new married woman brings her pots, dishes all that she needs to succeed in her role of married woman she has been prepared for since her childhood by her mother. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nwokocho Agbadi

sent his daughter [Nnu Ego] away with seven men and young girls carrying her personal possessions. There were seven goats, baskets and baskets of yams, yards and yards of white man's clothes, twenty - four home - spun lappas, rows and rows of Hausa trinkets and coral beads. Her ornamented cooking - pots and gaudy calabashes were attractively arranged round crates of clearest oils⁴⁵.

People do not have the same understanding of marriage in African societies as in European ones. In traditional Africa, the choice of a husband or a wife is made by the parents for their daughter or son. As it is said above, marriage within the African traditional set up has never been a union of the two individuals involved, it is first the union of the families of the man and the woman and for the couple to divorce, and both families must have done everything to reconcile them and failed before any separation can happen. Otherwise, in best of cases, the married woman will set up a house with her husband and occupy herself entirely with her duties as a wife and mother.

As a wife, the married woman owes her husband obedience; this gives her prestige in her family-in-law who protects her. But when conflicts arise the traditional woman leaves her husband without having to think of support for herself and her children. As long as her own family exists, she has a place to go

⁴⁵ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann, 1979; p : 28

where accommodation, care and protection are available. She will stay there until some grounds for reconciliation are found.

Women play a significant role in the upkeep of the traditional family. They perform the major part of their duties both at home and in the field. For instance, women do all the housework beginning with, the cleaning, the fetching of water, the daily pounding or grinding of corn, cooking and of course, attending to infants. It is women who keep markets going, sometimes walking distances taking several hours to get to an appointed place. This role of African women has not changed ever since. For the cereals on which he lives, man still depends on women's effort. Sowing, weeding and harvesting are almost everywhere exclusively female activities. The laborious nature of the work in the field varies according to the type of soil and climatic conditions. In some areas, planting and harvesting are performed three times a year and in some areas twice. These activities are easily performed in polygamous families where co-wives give each other assistance.

Polygamy is the most practiced system of marriage across Sub-Saharan Africa and especially in Muslim's households. It characterizes most traditional households and contrary to the criticism about it nowadays, polygamy values womanhood and enhances woman's status. The polygamous system provides women with a measure of protection and security; it saves them from excessive child bearing, permitting them to keep their identity with their own descent group who supports them in time of dispute with their husbands.

There are many arguments in favour of polygamy. The first one is barrenness. The aim of any marriage being procreation, when a wife does not give birth to any child, the man has the right and the duty to choose another wife if he doesn't want to repudiate his first wife. Sometimes he may wait for years before taking the painful decision, even if he loves his wife very well. This is

what Amatokwu does when her wife Nnu Ego has failed to bear him a single child.

She was not surprised when Amatokwu told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a nearby hut kept for old wives, because his people had found him a new wife. My father is desperate. It is now known that your chi came from the people down by the river. I am sorry; Nnu Ego, but I cannot fail my people⁴⁶.

Sometimes the woman is subject to her husband's constant mockery. The case is depicted by Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys Motherhood*. Indeed Nnu Ego is complaining about her husband's attitude and says: "What happened to us, Amatokwu? Is it my fault that I did not have a child for you? Do you think I don't suffer too?"⁴⁷ But the answer from her husband is shocking and almost surprising:

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 [.....] you are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, [and not to be] scratched by a nervy female who is all bones⁴⁸.

One understands through these different quotations what disaster barrenness is in African societies. In fact a childless wife is a valueless woman. The essential value of a married woman lays in her fecundity. It is over the question of children that tension most of the time arises between husband and wife in African families. Children constitute a wealth for Africans. The larger number of wives a man has, the richer he is because women and children form an important manpower to work on farm. Men desire to have as many children as possible and this explains why some men do not hesitate to take another wife when the first one fails to bear children. In short, it is as mother that the African

⁴⁶ Buchi Emecheta, op cit p: 30

⁴⁷ Buchi Emecheta, Idem; p: 31

⁴⁸ Buchi Emecheta, Ibid; p: 31

married woman commands the respect of everyone in her community. Yet, she can only command full and total respect when she gives birth to a boy

In effect, a man whose wife has born him only girls can complain about her because societies also attach great importance to boys. The case is depicted in *The Joy of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta after Nwakusor and Ubani, both Nnaife's friends, have been summoned to solve a misunderstanding between Nnu Ego and her co-wife Adaku. The case is stated to them but instead of laying the whole blame on Nnu Ego who apparently is wrong, they have made Adaku feel that since she has no son for the family, she has no right to complain about her senior wife's conduct because, first the senior wife is more respected in African society. Second, Nnu Ego has more rights than herself because she bears both boys and girls. As the two men say addressing to Adaku during this meeting:

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin? Nwakusor reminded her. Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life [...] I know you have children but they are girls who in a few years time will go and help build another man's immortality. The only woman who is immortalizing your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business. If I were in your shoes, I should go home and consult my chi to find out why male off springs have been denied to me. But instead you are here quarrelling about your senior wife.⁴⁹

This clearly shows the importance senior wives are given in African societies especially when they bear both boys and girls. Though Adaku is admired as a hardworking and rich woman her life is nothing if she does not bear both boys and girls, but most importantly boys.

Another argument in favour of polygamy is the assistance co-wives give each other and the solidarity which prevails among them even in period of

⁴⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann; 1979; p: 185

misunderstanding. An example of such assistance is given in *The Joys of Motherhood* when Naife is beating his second wife Adaku. In spite of the two wives' regular misunderstanding, Nnu Ego takes her co wife's defense in these terms:

Leave the poor woman alone. Do you want to kill the new child she is expecting? Open the door!" When Naife did open the door, Nnu Ego grabbed the *odo* which she used for pounding food and waved it menacingly over her husband's head, though in the event there was more shouting than physical violence done. "Don't you know Adaku is pregnant?" She demanded. "Don't you know?"⁵⁰

Being part of polygamous family also means that a woman can count on the companionship and help of her co-wives in domestic and economic tasks which must be performed by women at home and on farm. This is what Nwakusor, Naife's old friend, says when he is sent to pacify Nnu Ego who shows her disapproval after her husband has brought a new wife home.

Remember that the girl is here to help you look after your children. Your children remember. A few years ago- it seems like only yesterday- when I saw you on the Carter Bridge, you had no children to mind, let alone needing help to look after them. So Nnu Ego, daughter of Agbadi, you must thank our god Olisa and your chi for having blessed you. Your father would not be happy to see you behave this way⁵¹

Actually this state of things is confirmed later when Nnu Ego is weakened by the birth of her second set of twins: "Okpo was there to help with hot water, knives and things"⁵². Further we can read this:

She [Okpo] coiled up to her [Nnu Ego] warmly as if she were her own daughter, and would do anything Nnu Ego said, because she had been

⁵⁰ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann, 1979; p:151

⁵¹ Buchi Emecheta, *Idem*; p:207

⁵² Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*. Heinemann; London, 1979; p:209

orphaned early in life. She knew suffering too. So Okpo went to the Zabo market for Nnu Ego.⁵³

All these arguments show that polygamy is not seen as a bad thing, but a normal situation and a custom that reinforces women's status in society and that no one should either question or argue against. Of course, no woman accepts that her husband marries another wife. She will be jealous and this jealousy sometimes leads to some naughtiness. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, while showing her disapproval to her husband marrying Okpo, Nnu Ego "refused to share a room with this new girl and all their children"⁵⁴. In such a situation when it happens that two co-wives hate each other, it is the children who are the victims. They also hate one another and are always quarrelling. A polygamous family in this case is like a hell where there is no room for peace and love. In such a family women suffer most of the time.

No doubt polygamy is socially accepted because it values women and gives them a good position in society. Polygamous husbands are responsible for feeding their families. Life in such families obeys a code of good manners which is accepted by all its members. That is why women are married to men in happiness as well as in hardship; only death separates them with their husband. When it happens that a man is dead and should leave his wife, she performs the ceremonies of widowhood in respect of the customs and tradition at stake in her family-in-law. She is subjected to levirate afterward and is inherited by a member of her family -in- law. The respect attached to these two customs shows the importance of marriage in traditional Africa.

We can thus assert that marriage is the most important social institution and the key barometer of women's social status. To be a fulfilled person in African societies, women must meet a number of requirements. It is almost

⁵³Buchi Emecheta, *Idem* ; p 218

⁵⁴Buchi Emecheta, *Ibid*; p: 207

impossible for women to live single life. Marriage is the only criterion which gives prestige to women after excision. Yet, marriage alone is not enough to grant women a full respectability in society. They must bear children particularly male children. Women have to be submissive to established social norms and values. Moreover it is her responsibility to make sure children understand and adopt them. Finally a married woman is a kind of property for her husband and family-in-law. As such she is subjected to widowhood and levirate.

Not only do African women hold a great social position in African societies as seen above, but they also wield other important power in those societies. Let's now examine in more details some relevant practices against women's status in the novels under study.

Chapter III SOME PRACTICES AGAINST WOMEN'S WELFARE IN THE NOVELS UNDER STUDY

3-1: Traditional Practices which undermine women's welfare.

A novel is without any doubt a means by which writers depict their societies. It is the means by which writers say loudly what the majority of the people think and say lowly. Novels appear to be like a window through which the reader can see the world and its realities. Within this framework, writers can be viewed as the spokesmen of their communities. Their commitment sometimes is to denounce what is wrong in their societies and how to find ways and means to remedy.

In the novels under study, that is *The Bride Price and The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta has the merit to depict certain traditional practices which undermine women's status. Among those practices we can name the arranged marriage; the precocious marriage, the heavy bride price and the traditional practices of polygamy in Igbo society.

Marriage as described by Madame DZAGBE CUDJOE Calvoressi in *African Marriage Yesterday and Today* (1975) is

a union in which the man and the woman having passed through the approved customary procedures are legally recognized as husband and wife, and are therefore subject to all the rights, duties, and obligations such a relationship entails⁵⁵

Within the traditional set up as it is said above, the institution of marriage has never been a union of the two individuals involved. Since its first objective is the continuation of the kinship line, the family is involved and so, to separate

⁵⁵ DZAGBE CUDJOE CALVORESSI (Mme) « *African Marriage Yesterday and Today* » in *la Civilisation de la Femme dans la tradition africaine* p: 514

the family must also have done everything to reconcile the couple before any separation can happen. In such a society where even religion is family oriented, one can easily understand that the individual has no right and is subordinated to the group when it comes to choose a partner in marriage. The romantic marriage of modern societies with its rather haphazard matching of two individuals does not meet the needs of people in African societies. We think it is worth mentioning that the institution of marriage is something very important and much respected in African societies. That is why families are involved in the celebration of the marriage of their offspring. The Ibo society of Iboza is not an exception to the rule since people know that the purpose of such marriages is the continuation of the kinship line. This is how Aku- Nna's marriage with a rich man in *The Bride Price* and the one of Nnu Ego with Amatokwu and Nnaife in *The Joys of Motherhood* are decided respectively by Okonkwo and Nwokocha Agbadi.

For the first case, that is to say, the Marriage of Aku-nna is motivated by Okonkwo's ambition to become an "Obi" and take the respected Eze title. But before reaching his goal, Okonkwo needs too much money to organise a big and expensive sacrifice to the gods. So, he decides that Aku-nna should get married with a rich man and fetch a heavy bride price.

As for Nnu Ego, Agbadi has decided that she gets married with Nnaife after the first one with Amatokwu has failed. In fact, Nnu Ego is the only issue of Agbadi and Ona's love. She is born in the Iboza society and is married to the farmer Amatokwu, her first husband in the traditional way. Because Nnu Ego remains childless after a couple of years, Amatokwu divorces her.

After being rejected by Amatokwu as a barren woman, her doting father Agbadi has returned the bride price and has decided that "he would rather give his daughter to an old chief with a sense of the tried traditional values than to

some young man who only wanted her because of her name.”⁵⁶She is given away to the rather unattractive Nnaife who works for an English family in Lagos. Such a decision is promised to Ona, Nnu Ego’s mother, on her deathbed to allow Nnu Ego a life of her own and not to prevent her from being a full woman as her father does to her. Arranged marriage as depicted by Buchi Emecheta is so much relevant and is a practice which undermines women’s welfare.

Another relevant aspect of marriage that Buchi Emecheta criticises in her novels is the phenomenon of precocious marriage. In *The Bride Price* as well as in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta raises this Problem. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna and Ogugua are little girls of fifteen; and at this age, Okonkwo their so-called father has planned their marriage. As it is a custom in Ibo, many families start negotiating with Okonkwo as soon as the girls enter into womanhood. This is the case in *The Joys of Motherhood* with Nnaife when his twin daughter Kehinde enters into womanhood. To enter into womanhood means to have the first menstruations.

In fact, the very first day Okonkwo is informed about Aku-nna’s menstruation, he warns her about her relationship with Chike Ofulue, her teacher at primary school. Actually, Okonkwo is very pleased that Aku-nna has her first menstruations. He knows that the moment has come for him to achieve his ambition though the little girl is only fifteen and he doesnot want anyone to prevent him from reaching his goal. As Buchi Emecheta writes:

He stood there in the fading light, eyeing her as one would a precious statue, inwardly congratulating himself on his luck in having had the opportunity to marry her mother. Now the entire bride price would come to him.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann; 1979; p :35

⁵⁷ Buchi Emecheta, *the Bride Price*, London: Heinemann. 1976; p :119

But unfortunately, Aku-nna refuses against all expectations to do with her uncle's plan. She refuses to be imposed a husband on. In order to express her disapproval to it, she even refuses to eat the hen which has been slaughtered to celebrate her womanhood. She thinks it is not fair to exclude women from decisions that engage their future and the fate of the society they are living in. As it is said, "she was beginning to feel that it was unjust that she was not to be allowed a say in her own life, and she was beginning to hate her mother for being so passive about it all."⁵⁸ As a consequence, she decides to put an end to such deeds. Aku-nna refuses to be regarded and treated as a treasure or a merchandise to be sold to the highest bidder, because such a practice undermines women's welfare. This is what Emecheta is denouncing through Aku-nna's reaction.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, we notice the same reaction with Kehinde, Nnaife's twin daughter when he has decided to marry her to one of the prospective visitors. So, one evening, Nnaife has called Kehinde and asked her what she thinks of a certain young man who, though he has not gone to college like Taiwo's prospective husband, has a good job at the railway. He is not prepared for the answer he gets:

"I am not marrying that man"

"But why? He (Nnaife) asked, putting on as gentle as he could manage"

"Because, because [...] I don't know, father. He grew up in Ibuza. I don't like him, came the hesitant reply."⁵⁹

Like Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*, Kehinde in *The Joys of Motherhood* rejects her father's will and chooses to marry a Yoruba man from a Muslim background without her father's consent. But before such marriage in traditional way is

⁵⁸Buchi Emecheta, *the Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976; p : 120

⁵⁹ Buchi Emecheta, op. cit, p : 204

valid, not only should the family be involved but the bride price must also be paid.

Indeed the bride price is another traditional practice which is always compulsory during the process of marriage in Africa and particularly among Igbo people. No one is allowed to marry a wife unless he pays the required bride price. The bride price is a duty which must be performed before marriage. It is through its payment that parents recognise the validity of a marriage in the traditional set up and give their blessing. In *The Bride Price*, Buchi Emecheta stresses that Ezekiel Odia, Aku-nna's father, has paid the bride price before getting married with Ma Blackie. So has Amatokwu to Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nevertheless, this very important traditional practice is the cause of much disagreement. The point is that there is no fixed amount of money as bride price. The sum to be paid sometimes depends on the will of the bride's parents and becomes a pure transaction between two families.

Thus, the bride price from its symbolic aspect it represents has become nothing else than an utter means of transaction where a very big amount of money must be gained at all costs in exchange of a daughter. Okonkwo is longing for such a huge sum in order to satisfy his ambition. As I have mentioned above in this work, he wants to become an Obi and take the respected title of Eze. As a consequence, he will be regarded as one of the most respected men of Ibo. But before this dream of his becomes a reality, Okonkwo must perform a big and expensive sacrifice. The point is that Okonkwo cannot afford this duty unless he marries his daughters to people who are willing to provide him with much money.

The problem of heavy bride price is common to our modern societies too, and Okonkwo is not the only one to practice it. As Iloba, Okonkwo's son, in *The Bride Price* says,

it happens everywhere now, you know. Did you not hear that the first doctor we have in this town is going to marry a girl from Ogwashi-ukwu? And that her parents are asking the doctor to pay nearly two hundred pounds for a bride price?⁶⁰

Such a revelation convinces us that the problem of high bride price is a practice in fashion and that his father is just following the trend. Buchi Emecheta raises the same problem in *The Joys of Motherhood* when Agbadi prefers to marry her daughter to the rather unattractive Nnaife who works for an English family in Lagos. For Agbadi, Nnaife must be a rich man because he is in the white man's job in a place called Lagos. As he has said in *The Joys of Motherhood*, "they said any fool can be rich in such places."⁶¹ Consequently, Nnu Ego will fetch a heavy bride price to Agbadi by marrying Nnaife. Her bride price will be heavier if she has attended school. As it is said in *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta, in the traditional society of Ibo, going to school is quite an achievement particularly if the person is a girl. Okonkwo allows Aku-nna to attend school on purpose. He discloses his aim and strategy to his sons in the following lines:

Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at the same time. Their bride prices will come to me. You see the trend today is that the education girls fetch more money.⁶²

If Okonkwo allows his niece Aku-nna to attend school, it is with the aim of fetching her a heavy bride price when she gets married. I must mention that the name Aku-nna is meaningful. It means father's wealth. Indeed, a girl in African society and particularly in Ibo society is seen as a wealth because she will fetch some money to her family sooner or later. In another word, Aku-nna has become Okonkwo's wealth since her true father Ezekiel Odi dies. The

⁶⁰ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976, p:75

⁶¹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann; 1979; p:36

⁶² Buchi Emecheta, op cit p :75

latter would have the same ambition if he were alive. It is one of such practices which undermine women's welfare that Emecheta criticises in her books. She is for the promotion of women. She is convinced that the liberation of Africa is directly connected to the liberation of its women.

3-2 Gender discrimination

Another relevant problem in Emecheta's novels against women's prestige is gender discrimination. The phrase gender discrimination may be considered in different contexts. First, it relates to the difference between women and men and the treatment it involves. When I have a brief glance at women characters in Emecheta's different novels under study, I notice that they are underestimated. A brief glance at their status suggests that socio-cultural attitudes are all weighted against them. Secondly, gender discrimination has to do with the hatred developed by a certain category of people against another one in Nigeria's culture. In the first case, women are discriminated against. They are given less place in their society than men. There are many instances in Buchi Emecheta's novels under study concerning the gap between the privileges of men compared to those of women. The first one is education.

Indeed in Africa, people find it abnormal the education of a girl. The schooling of a girl child is thought to be a waste of time and money. Such a thought is depicted in *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta. Aku-nna's schooling is thought to be abnormal. This makes of Ma Blackie, Aku-nna's mother, to be considered as elite because her children are attending school. In the history of Ibuza there has never been such a thing. So the Schooling of Aku-nna is an exception for people in Ibuza. As it is said in *The Bride Price*, "there were only three girls in the whole school and, as was later to discover, she was the oldest of them and the one in the highest class."⁶³ As a consequence, Aku-Nna must stop her schooling at all cost. This makes us label the Ibuza society as a

⁶³ Buchi Emecheta, *The bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976 , p:81

patriarchal one where all the power and privileges are given to men and women are regarded as second class citizen. This situation of discrimination against women is also noticed in marriage. In the mind of people of Ibuza, even if they make an exception in sending some girls to school, their education must stop sooner or later when they are at age of getting married.

In fact, the greatest difference between men and women concerns marriage. In African societies, parents receive the dowry from the groom's family without consulting the girl who is going to get married. Who a girl will marry is her parents' concern and particularly her father's. Women are then regarded as less than a thing that men can exchange for money. In *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta, the case of Aku-nna is outstanding. Even if her own father Ezekiel Odia were still alive, her fate would be more or less the same. She would be given to the highest bidder. We should not forget that Ezekiel Odia has named his daughter on purpose.

Aku-nna, meaning literally father's wealth, knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price. For him this was something to look forward to⁶⁴

This means that parents in Africa consider their girl child only because of the dowry she brings for them. On the contrary they won't be given any Importance. People prefer to have a boy child than a girl child. The case is also criticised in *The Joys of Motherhood* when Nwakusor and Ubani, both Nnaife's friends, have been summoned to solve a misunderstanding between Nnu Ego and her co-wife Adaku. As they say while they are blaming Adaku, she has no son for the family, so she has no right to complain about her senior wife's conduct because,

⁶⁴ Buchi Emecheta, *The bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976 , p:4

not only does she bear girls to Nnaife, but she also bears boys. As the two men say addressing to Adaku during this meeting:

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you, Adaku, the daughter of whoever you are, are committing an unforgivable sin? Nwakusor reminded her. Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life [...] I know you have children but they are girls who in a few years' time will go and help build another man's immortality. The only woman who is immortalizing your husband you make unhappy with your fine clothes and lucrative business. If I were in your shoes, I should go home and consult my chi to find out why male offspring have been denied to me. But instead, you are here quarrelling about your senior wife.⁶⁵

African women command the respect of everybody in their community when they give birth to male offspring. This means that a man can complain about her wife in Africa when she fails to give birth to male offspring. In *The Bride Price*, Buchi Emecheta says that Ezekiel Odia still complains about his wife Ma Blackie because she gives her only one son. Yet he pays a double bride price for her. "He would remind Ma Blackie that for having paid this heavy bride price he had had their marriage sanctified by Anglicanism. And what had he to show for it- an only son!"⁶⁶

Throughout this quotation, we notice that Ezekiel Odia does not consider Nna-nndo's senior's sister Aku-nna as his child. If he ever does, it will only be because of her bribe price when she gets marriage. This situation clearly shows how women are discriminated against in this patriarchal society of Igbo which is characterized by the domination of men. Women are wrongfully denied access to the basic men's advantages; they can neither go to school nor choose their husband. In African societies, men have the right to do whatever they want. Contrary to women, men can choose their wife before informing their parents so

⁶⁵ Buchi Emecheta, op cit, p: 166

⁶⁶ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976, p:3

that they start negotiations. In African societies, such privileges are denied to women.

Another domain where African customs and traditions impose different rules to both men and women is sexuality. For example, men are allowed to have their own ways. They may have adventures with many other women before marriage without worrying. But when a girl has a sexual intercourse with a man before her marriage she is not respected; neither are her parents. Which means that, girls must be virgin before getting married; it is a shame for a girl's family when their daughter has sexual contact with a man before marriage, even if this is with her prospective husband. In African societies, women have no rights. But only men have all the rights.

The other aspect of gender discrimination is the hatred developed against some categories of people because of their social status. The problem of slaves for example is criticized in the different novels under study. Slavery has been a bad practice in some African societies before the advent of colonization in Africa. The phenomenon is well known to most African people before it has become a trade between continents. In *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta depicts largely such a phenomenon. In the first novel, the Ofulue are considered as slaves. As a consequence, they are hated and considered as a pariah in Ibuza. But the last thing which raises a crisis between Okonkwo and the Ofulue is Aku-nna's will to get married with Chike.

In fact, Chike is Mr Ofulue's son. The Ofulue's family is a wealthy and prosperous one in Ibuza. Most of Mr Ofulue's children are learned people who hold the monopoly of the key posts in the civil service. Emecheta writes that:

the senior ofulue was 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 small town like theirs was being made known to the rest of Nigeria.⁶⁷

Normally such a family should deserve pride and respect among people who are mainly illiterates and farmers. They should be welcomed by an ambitious and money thirsty Okonkwo who needed a big amount of money to fulfill his dream of becoming an Obi and receive the respected Eze title. Akunna's choice to get married to Chike has provoked her uncle's wrath and the misfortunes of the whole family because the Ofulue have a slave blood. Consequently, no sane girl can dare associate with him or any other person from his family. Even the senior Ofulue dare not marry his wife in the village. Buchi Emecheta says that "he has all his four wives from the nearby village."⁶⁸

The story of the Ofulue is known by all the inhabitants of Ibuza. So, in spite of their wealth they are considered as pariahs in Ibuza society. The writer describes the past of the Ofulue; Chike has heard from his mother that his grandmother is a princess who has been captured from Ubulu Ukwu, a town at only fifteen miles from Ibuza in the days when there are no roads but only foot paths used by warriors. She is so beautiful that her master has decided not to sell her, but buy a man slave to keep her company. By the time her master dies and she has to be buried alive with him, she has already born him four sons and two daughters. The girls are sold but the rightful son of Ofulue has retained all the boys. Soon it has become illegal to trade in slave; Ofulue retains all the boys and decides to send them to the missionaries. "Most of the slaves whom the

⁶⁷ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976, p: 85

⁶⁸ Buchi Emecheta, *Op cite*, p : 85

missionaries took in were to become the first teachers, headmasters, and later their children became the first doctors and lawyers in many Igbo towns”⁶⁹

So, though the Ofulue are rich and learned people, they are regarded as slaves and are treated with contempt by the other inhabitants of Ibuza who consider themselves as freeborn people. We can say that in Ibo town called Ibuza, there are two categories of people; the freeborn people and the slaves. The freeborn people underestimate the slaves and consider them as outcasts. Such a discrimination and hatred developed against slaves in *The Bride Price* is also depicted in *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* Agunwa, Agbadi’s senior wife, has become suddenly sick one night and dies. As senior wife, she must be buried with much honour. So, her personal slave is ceremoniously called in a loud voice by the medicine man. She must be laid inside the grave first before the deceased’s body is laid in. But this young and beautiful girl does not wish to die yet. She keeps begging for her life much to the annoyance of the men standing around. They finally knock her to death. She falls into the grave, silent forever. The maltreatment of this slave girl once more shows how slaves are discriminated against in Ibuza community. In such a situation, what can we do to improve women’s status?

⁶⁹ Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976, p :84

Chapter IV SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE WOMEN'S STATUS: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

The concept of empowerment of African women is often subtle and does not necessarily consist in women's involvement in public affairs. It first and foremost consists in giving women an official or legal position to be involved in decision making. Not only is it necessary to determine the legal and conventional status of women in society at certain moment of their history, but it is also important to ensure that such rights and privileges are maintained in practice. This has been the underlying theme of discussions in Beijing during the world conference on women status in September 1975. Women's status should be improved. The theme has been largely upheld by participants who are extremely enthusiastic in their pronouncements on the subject.

What justifies such global awareness is the failure to treat women fairly in the distribution of income, the injustice to women in the non respect of their rights, the impossibility to educate women as well as men and to consider them as equal. So the conference has decided to insert women in the process of development, to value their roles by improving their status. This should be done through sensitization, training, and creation of national mechanisms to redefine their status and their involvement in decision making. However, it is not at all certain whether the full effect of this will ever be felt. The principle of gender equality is no longer questioned today. What is at stake is to know how it should be perceived and practiced in different socio-cultural context, and what economical and political implication this may have on women. It is then high time people moved away from regarding gender issues as a power struggle between men and women, because that is not the case.

Most African countries' constitutions written after independences, having guaranteed equality for all their citizens irrespective of race, religion, sex,

ethnic, origin and circumstances of birth, all women have in theory equal rights as their male counterparts. So, the main questions I ask when I consider improving women's status and empowering them are how African women can break free from social impediments and what can be the economical and political implications in their life.

This part of our study attempts to suggest some ways and means to improve women's status. They include women's empowerment through economic welfare and their political involvement in social affair.

4-1 Women's empowerment through economic welfare

Women constitute the majority of the African population (52%). So, nothing can really be done for the welfare of human beings without their participation. Women weigh heavily in most important domains of development. They are present and very active in the different sectors of development though their action is almost invisible.

The chief occupation of African women has for many years been that of domesticity. Our traditional societies, having defined their field of interest, some women have long been kept busy at home with housework as wives, and child bearing and raising as mother in spite of the introduction of school education in African society. Women are the ones who confer dignity and respect on where they live and as such their place is at home. These functions of women are illustrated in Fon (language spoken in south of Benin) by the saying "SUNU GLEGBENU" and "YUNNU HUESSI", which means that men are destined to work outside and women to stay at home. In the light of this perception, girls are denied formal education as given by school. In general, the fact that girls are denied school education is the main reason of their inability to confront with the modern requirements and to take a full position beside men in public affairs. Today, years after the independence of most African countries, women should

evolve from their past social status and devote themselves to their own empowerment.

Women's emancipation should be promoted by encouraging women's education and their financial independence. For example, we should intensify adult literacy in course in most African countries and expand the range of activities performed by women in most communities. By so doing we will remove anti-social practices like the outcast system, moral depravity among our youths and social injustice against widows, by rehabilitating the handicapped through moral and financial support. Owing to their lack of resource and financial dependence, African women are denied assets like cars and even lands. Today we should encourage women's economic welfare so that they have access to financial independence. Often considered as invisible actors in development, women's contribution to socio-economic development and poverty alleviation is poorly understood and most often deliberately under-estimated. But we should know that women do produce more than half of the food that is grown in Africa. They are usually seen by the side of their men during farming periods. Furthermore, each woman generally makes it a point of holding and managing her own kitchen garden in order to grow vegetables and fruits. The importance of women's roles in the development of Africa no longer needs to be questioned. Studies on the modes and systems of production as well as the nature of the labour force clearly show the values of women's contribution. Women carry out commercial activities and contribute to the family expenses including cooking for the family, paying school fees for her children, etc...The small revenue women get is generally not proportional to the efforts they make. That is why with the introduction of local development, women must be organized into small groups specialised in diverse activities in order to maximise their revenues and improve the quality of their production as well. We should provide them with financial aids and skills to develop their different activities of farm-work, fishing, pottery, weaving and trading.

Today, owing to most governments' policy of equal work for equal pay, and full pay during 12 weeks of maternity leave, many educated women are in paid employment as teachers, nurses, doctors, pharmacists, engineers, radio and T.V. broadcasters, bankers, civil servant, and armed forces, etc. We should promote these modern women by appointing them to important posts of responsibility; so that they can rise to the highest levels of their profession. This will enable African women to devote their time to their jobs and other economic activities which exist in the urban centres such as fashion designing, catering, hair-dressing and cosmetology, among other choices.

4-2 Women's political empowerment

Colonisation has prevented women from political activities. Women under colonial rules cannot claim the rights which are refused to women of their mother countries. Consequently, they are excluded from public life though some of them are willing to assert themselves. The biggest problem of women from the colonial period for example, has been their involvement in political or public affairs of their societies. Because they are considered less intelligent than men, women have not quickly benefited from the advantages of colonisation. From that time on, men has a supremacy over them and has learnt to rule over the society and decided on women's behalf. Even in rural areas, African women are the man's co-partner. They are less influential at work due to the changes in society. They have become more dependent on men.

Women are excluded from decisions that engage their future and the fate of the society they are living in, they cannot fully participate in neither its advancement nor its welfare. Women's political initiative through their participation to public life dates far back to the period of independence. As African leaders have become vocal and active in the fight for independence, women join in the various national campaigns. They have marched and have protested with men and have gone to jail for the same cause.

After the independences of most African countries, leaders in their need of development give their female counterparts some political rights to better participate in the development of their countries. After the first years of independences and the declaration of women's decade in 1975, women are used as means of propaganda for years before the advent of military powers. These military powers have been against any form of public gathering. In such situation, women are organised in groups according to their interests. Those forms of organisations are exploited by State parties. It is only with the implementation of new strategies that the process has been launched again through the creation of national networks such as NGOs in order to define priorities about gender development.

Today, with the development of democratic processes which tend to settle democratic countries where citizens' rights are protected against arbitrariness, women should be encouraged to contribute to the process of nation-building. The constitution of most independent countries and international charters guarantee equality for all their citizens irrespective of race, religion, sex, ethnic origin, and circumstances of birth. Thus, African women should have equal chance to participate in public affairs as their male counterparts at least in theory. Suffrage being universal in most African countries nowadays, important elective positions should be given to a number of women because they are still in minority in government posts and parliaments.

As women have become more qualified and are better informed because of the education they receive at school and the new ideas to which they are exposed, they should assume their full stature like men and hold elective offices. Women and their organizations should work to educate their counterparts on their rights. There should be voluntary women's groups who instruct women on national and world events as well as on their rights and privileges. This will help women gain confidence and reveal to the society some traits of their

nature. As such, we can assert that African women are considered as men's partners like in the past than as docile onlookers. This partnership will certainly contribute to a better harmony in the family and, above all, to the political empowerment of African women.

The improvement of women's status especially African women implies that they have equal rights like their men counterparts, that is to say, right to life, right to sane marital life, right to education and to employment. Women should not be victim of any form of traditional impediment. But despite the effort to improve women's status, the situation has not changed. It is simply because many women do not have access to wealth and knowledge. Women worldwide and particularly African women are still subject to other forms of discrimination and social impediments: infanticide which is a common practice in some parts of Africa still exists. Most women do not have a sane family life; some are beaten by their husbands. Many women are still persecuted everyday in Africa especially in countries at war. They are raped and sometimes forced to exile.

The phenomenon of excision which deprives women from orgasm should be totally eradicated. There still exist disparities between men and women in the fields of education and employment. Gender issues which are at stake today in most African countries should be accepted and adopted by governments. Civil organisations especially NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) should work to eliminate disparities between men and women. All children without distinction of sex should be educated to it. The development of mankind implies the elimination of disparities between men and women. They should be considered as equal to live together in complementarities in order to develop their nation. Developing a nation is to consider each member of the society his place since we know that men and women do not have the same morphology and cannot play the same role. Developing the nation is also to give women a good status in society.

African women should stress participation of both men and women in the work of nation development; they should organize themselves for the purpose of cooperating, defending and supporting one another; this will bring happiness and enable women to make a constructive contribution to society. The crucial question today is not sex; but gender equity. It is how national and individual goals can be harmonized and fulfilled in accordance with human potential. It wants politics to get women to benefit from equal chance, equal treatment before laws, equal treatment in their participation in social institutions, equal access to education, equal salary for the same work. Nature has endowed human beings with different qualities. Some are born large; other small, some wise; other stupid; some healthy; other ill; some male; other female. Inequality is a fact of life. In public affairs, women should participate as human beings rather than consider as a person of a particular sex.

CONCLUSION

I have tried in this research work to study the status of women in African society I have made my investigation through two novels, namely *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, written by Buchi Emecheta. The fundamental question which my research work has dealt with is to know whether African woman is oppressed or not in the author's works. The theme has been first discussed in the two novels under study, then throughout articles written in reviews and other sources like critical and theoretical works by critics who deal with women issues. I have come to the conclusion that the status of women in African societies as seen by Buchi Emecheta through her writings is degraded by different forms of oppression her female characters are submitted to.

Women's oppression has been identified as the frustration, the sufferings, the brutality exerted on them by both their men and women counterparts; their deprivation as well as certain customs imposed on them by the society in which they live. An incursion into Buchi Emecheta's life to see how she has come to depict so well the status of African women in her novels has helped me establish a close relationship between herself and her characters. In fact, Buchi Emecheta denounces the oppressions imposed on African girls or women through the events of her own life. Most of her novels are the expression of her own life or the lives of other women around her. This makes us say that her writings are autobiographical in nature.

Yet, the African woman is said to have been highly valued in African societies by customary practices such as infant betrothal, excision, girl virginity, and levirate. She is seen as men's companions whose roles are clearly defined. The African woman is rarely oppressed in the olden societies, and though some husbands abuse their wives on some rare occasions, the fact has never been common in traditional Africa. The status of women as defined in those societies

depends on a person's involvement in the social, economic and political affairs and the importance attached to the task one performs as member of a group. These respected and noble roles are seen as complementary to those of men. Another customary practice which has been identified to give good status to women in African society is marriage. Marriage is the most important social institution and the key barometer of women's social status.

To be a fulfilled person in African society, a woman must get married. It is almost impossible for women to live a single life in African society; that is why some parents impose husbands on their daughters. However marriage alone was not enough to grant women a full respectability in society. They must bear children, particularly male children. Women have to be submissive to established social norms and cultural values. Moreover it is her responsibility to make sure that children understand and adopt them. Finally a married woman used to be a kind of property for her husband and family-in-law. As such she is subjected to widowhood and levirate which have been identified to undermine women's status.

Another relevant problem which undermines women's status that I have identified during this research work in Buchi Emecheta's novels is gender discrimination. African women have been relegated to a position of secondary importance by their male counterparts who prevent them from most privileges they may profit by in society. This makes us plead for a re-evaluation of African women's image. That's why I make some suggestions to improve women's status.

Today's women play a minimal role in public life, although constitutions guarantee their rights. This is because the level of African women's under development especially that of traditional African women is so important that the empowerment of these women cannot be achieved in relatively short time. What is pretty sure is that much has been said to improve women's status. And

if governments of different African countries enact necessary legislations that generally improve women's status, they will be totally empowered. So, women need to be fully organized and mobilized to challenge legally and through other legitimate actions, those traditional impediments and social constraints to their full empowerment. It is certainly the reason why the new code of people and family in the Republic of Benin is welcome.

ANNEX

Owing to the fact that characters in the two novels under study are numerous and sometimes confusing, I have decided to study the relationship between them in this section that I have entitled notes.

A/ *The Joys of Motherhood*

1- Nwokocha Agbadi

He is a very wealthy local chief, a great wrestler and Nnu Ego's father. He had many wives in time among whom Agunwa and Ona.

2- Agunwa

She is Agbadi's senior wife. She died and was buried with a slave girl who reincarnated later in Nnu Ego.

3- Ona

She is Agbadi's wife and Nnu Ego's mother. She used to stay more regularly with her father Obi Umunna. She died the day she was giving birth to Nnu Ego.

4- Nnu Ego

She is the protagonist of the novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. She is Ona's only child, then the apple of her parents' eyes. It is said in the novel that she is the incarnation of the slave girl who died with Agunwa, Agbadi's senior wife.

5- Amatokwu

He is Nnu Ego's first husband. He used to ill-treat Nnu Ego when the latter hasn't given birth to any child yet.

6- Nnaife Owulum

He is Nnu Ego's second husband and a polygamist. He is married to two other wives namely Adaku that he inherited from his late brother and Okpo the youngest wife.

7- Adaku

She is Nnaife's second wife who bears him only girl children. She is a very ambitious wife. She turns out to be one of those shameless modern women that Nnu Ego didn't like. She is a sharp contrast of her co-wife Nnu Ego. She makes adjustment to improve her life and this involves changes in her attitude.

8- Okpo

She is Nnaife's third wife and the youngest one. She is a very obedient woman who assisted Nnu Ego in her pregnancy.

9- Kehinde and Taiwo

They are Nnaife and Nnu Ego's twins. The first has decided to marry a Yoruba son without her father's consent

10- Oshiaju (oshia)

He is Nnu Ego and Nnaife's son.

11- Nwakusor and Ubani

They are Nnaife's good friends. They occasionally come to settle matters between Nnu Ego and Adaku when Nnaife is away.

B / *The Bride Price*

1- Ezekiel Oda

He is also called Nna, meaning “father” in Igbo language. He is Ma Blackie’s husband. He gets two children: Aku- Nna and Nna- nndo. He was expecting to get an expensive bride price from her daughter’s marriage. He used to tell her “always remember that you are mine”. Unfortunately, he dies precociously and is buried in Lagos.

2- Ma Blackie

She is Ezekiel Oda’s husband and Aku-nna and Nna- nndo’s mother. She is a tall woman; people used to call her “the palm- tree” because of her height. She is a dark complexion woman and is nicknamed “Blackie the Black “. Her neighbours added the respectful title “Ma”. This is how she is called Ma Blackie. Though always cheerful, Ma Blackie has problems of motherhood: she is very slow in getting pregnant. She is inherited by her brother –in – law Okonkwo after her husband’s death.

3- Aku-nna

She is the protagonist in *The Bride Price*. She is a little girl of 13 years old. She takes after her father and is determined not to deceive him. She wishes she could get married with a rich man whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford an expensive bride price. Unfortunately, Nna dies earlier and her ambitious uncle Okonkwo plans to marry her off for a high bride price. Caught in the web of tradition, Aku- nna falls in love with her teacher, Chike, whom she is forbidden to love. She dies at the end of the book after giving birth to a little girl.

4- Nna-nndo(father is a shelter)

He is a boy of eleven years old. Contrary to his sister Aku-nna, he looks like his mother. Both Nna-nndo and Aku-nna were attending school in Lagos when their father died.

5- Okonkwo

He is Odia's elder brother. He gets married with three wives among whom Ozubu and Ezebona. He also inherits Ma Blackie after her husband's death. He is an ambitious man who plans to marry her niece Aku-nna off for a high bride price. He will unfortunately fail in his attempt to do so.

6- Ngbeke

She is Okonkwo's senior wife and Iloba's mother.

7- Ozubu

She is Okonkwo's second wife

8- Ezebona

She is Okonkwo's youngest wife and Ngbeke and Ozubu's co-spouse.

9- Iloba

He is Okonkwo's eldest son. He is a young man of twenty and a farmer. He is jealous of Aku-nna because of her education.

10-Agugua

She is Okonkwo's daughter and Aku-nna's cousin. She is of the same age with Aku-nna.

11-Ofulu

He is Chike's father he was born slave. He is a retired teacher. He gets married with several wives.

12-Chike

He is Aku-nna's lover with whom Aku-nna escapes from Ibuza to Ughelli. They met each other for the first time the very day Aku-nna, her brother and her mother were going back to Ibuza after their father's death. Like his father, Chike is a teacher. He teaches Aku-nna at the primary school.

13-Ben Adegor.

He is Chike's colleague at St Thoma's teacher training college. He lives in Ughelli. He is the one who accommodates Chike and Aku-nna in Ughelli after their escape from Ibuza.

14-Okoboshi

He is Aku-nna's classmate and lover. He is also known for being talkative. He is the young man who kidnaps Aku-nna.

15-The medicine man

He is the man who has been recharging Ma Blackie's fertility

16-Mama John Bull

She is a relative. Her husband is related to Ma Blackie.

17-Mazi Arinze and aunt Marry

They are other relatives. The first one is a doctor.

18- Uncle Joseph he is Odiá's relative. He is from Ibuza. He is known to be talkative, that's why he is nicknamed local newspaper.

19-Uncle Uche

Actually, he is Nna's nephew. His leisurely attitude to life has been the cause of big quarrel between him and Nna. He Had to leave his uncle's house for a friend's house.

20-Uzo

She is Aku-nna's aunt

21-Dogo

He is Uzo's husband.

22-Obiageli

She is Ogugua and Aku-nna's age group's friend.

23-Zik

He is the dance teacher who trains Aku-nna and her dance group.

24-Dumedi

Nna-nndo's friend

25-Ma Beauty

She is a widower whose husband is killed in an accident. She is inherited by one of her husband's brother

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Achebe's book offers an excellent example of powerful women in the Ibo village in the role they play in religion. At first glance, the women in *Things Fall Apart* may seem to be an oppressed group with little power. However, this characterization of Ibo women reveals itself to be limiting, once the reader discovers the diverse roles of the Ibo women throughout the novel. This book will be a helpful resource for my research work because it concentrates on the place of women in that society.

- 2- Bâ Mariama, *So Long a Letter*, London: Heinemann, 1980.

Mariama's *So Long a Letter* is a sequence of reminiscences, some bitter, recounted by Senegalese school teacher Ramatoulaye. The letter, addressed to her old friend Aissatou, is a record of her emotional struggle for survival after her husband's abrupt decision to take a second wife. Although sanctioned by Islam, his action is a calculated betrayal of her trust and a brutal rejection of their life together. This novel is relevant source of information because it gives a testimony to the plight of those articulate women who live in social milieu dominated by attitudes and values that deny them their proper status.

3- Emecheta Buchi, *The Bride Price*, London: Heinemann, 1976.

Emecheta's *The Bride Price* is the first novel under study. It is a love story between Aku-nna and Chike, two young people. Their life is complicated by tribal customs they neither know nor understand. Actually, the novel deals with Aku-nna and Chike's struggle against the ancestral practices in their society. The bone of contention in *The Bride Price* is marriage. We choose to work on this book because it better depicts the oppression of African women.

4- Emecheta Buchi, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London: Heinemann, 1979.

The Joys of Motherhood is the second novel under study. It tells the moving story of Nnu Ego, a West African woman devoted to her children, giving them all her life – with the result that she finds herself friendless and alone in middle age. *The Joys of Motherhood* is a powerful commentary on polygamy, patriarchy and women's changing roles in urban Nigeria. We choose to work on this novel because, like *The Bride Price*, it presents a character who acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother; roles which confers a good status to women in Africa.

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6- Nwapa Flora, *Women are Different*, Tana press 1986 .

The author's book is a moving story of a group of Nigerian women, from their schooldays together through the trials and tribulations of their adult lives.

Through their stories, we see some of the universal problems faced by women everywhere: the struggle for financial independence and a rewarding career, combined with the need to bring up a family, often without a man.

All this is set against the background of a developing Nigeria, from colonial time, through the Nigeria Civil War to the present day. This novel is helpful because Flora Nwapa demonstrates her skill and compassionate insight into the problems of women.

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SPEECH

Dear chairman, honorable members of the panel, dear friends and parents, ladies and gentlemen, good morning and thank you very much for accepting to attend this ceremony of graduation. It has been a long way to get at this crucial moment in my study life. The road was long and hard, but as Samuel Johnson has said “Great works are performed not by strength but perseverance.” It is in this expectation that I’ve kept going forward in spite of the obstacles and difficulties I’ve faced in doing this research work.

Before going further into this presentation, allow me to say a hearty thank to professor Aïnamon for his relentless effort in promoting generations of students. Without him, I would have given up this research work. Indeed, Professor Aïnamon has accepted to supervise this research work without hesitation. I still remember the day I went to him hopelessly at home to pray him to supervise this research work. He accepted heartfully and even provided me with some required documents. I’m very grateful to you dear Professor. May God bless you and give you long life.

My thanks also go to Dr Patrice Akogbeto who has consented to give some of his time to reviewing this work despite his busy schedule. In fact, Dr Akogbeto has given a special touch to this work and I’m very grateful to you and to all my lecturers who have contributed to my training.

I cannot forget you Dr Laure Capo Chi-Chi. Many a time, I’ve referred to you to help me understand or help me do things. Thank you very much.

The theme of my research work is: *“In their own voice, the status of women in African societies as seen through selected works by Buchi Emecheta”*. The study has been carried out through two novels: *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta.

The Bride Price is the first novel under study. It deals with Aku-nna and Chike's struggle against the ancestral practices in their society. The bone of contention in *The Bride Price* is marriage. I choose to work on this book because it better depicts the status of African women.

As for *The Joys of Motherhood*, it tells the story of Nnu Ego, a West African woman who is devoted to her children, giving them all her life with the result that they could take care of her later on. *The Joys of Motherhood* is a powerful commentary on polygamy, patriarchy and women's changing roles in urban Nigeria. I choose to work on this novel because, like *The Bride Price*, it presents a character who acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother; roles which confers a good status to women in Africa.

The work is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the literature review. It is an account of a critical reading and analysis of some previous research works in the same field as mine and a mention of their limitations that I try to bring as my contribution in the field of research. Chapter 2 is about the author, and her novels. Here I have studied the personality of Buchi Emecheta in order to establish a relationship between her and the protagonists in her novels. Chapter 3 discusses the social status of women in African societies. My analysis in this chapter is based on customary practices and on marriage and family life. I have come to the conclusion that certain customary practices give women a good position in African societies. Women benefit from many prerogatives which symbolise their status. This chapter draws on key elements from *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* to discuss the status of women in African societies. Through the main characters respectively Aku-nna and Nnu Ego, Buchi Emecheta denounces the unhappy position held by African women. Many readers who are familiar with Emecheta's own life posit that the bulk of her work is autobiographical. That is why the theme of the status of women is extensively discussed by the author herself in her novels. Chapter 4

makes a strong case of some relevant facts against women's status in the novels and chapter 5 makes suggestions to improve women's status.

Owing to the fact that characters in the two novels under study are numerous and sometimes confusing, I have studied the relationship between them in a section that we entitle notes. This is to help any reader of my research work to have a clear view on the two novels under study.

There are different definitions of the phrase "status of women". But for the purpose of this research work, status is the position of a person as a member of a group entitled to certain rights. Such position in African societies depends on the prestige or importance that makes other people respect and admire an individual as member of society. As I have underlined, the respect and the practice of certain customary practices in Africa give good status to women. But the fundamental question which my research work has dealt with is whether the African woman is oppressed or not in her right position as member of the society in Buchi Emecheta's works.

The theme has been discussed thoroughly in the two novels under study. I have come to the conclusion that Buchi Emecheta depicts through her writings a degraded status of women by different forms of oppression her female characters are submitted to.

Women's oppression has been identified as the frustration, the sufferings, the brutality exerted on them by both their men and women counterparts; their deprivation as well as certain customs imposed on them by the society in which they live. An incursion into Buchi Emecheta's life to see how she has come to depict so well the status of African women in her novels has helped me establish a close relationship between herself and her characters. In fact, Buchi Emecheta denounces the oppressions imposed on African girls and women through the events of her own life. Most of her novels are about the expression

of her own life or the lives of other women around her. This makes me say that most of Buchi Emecheta's writings are autobiographical in nature.

Another relevant problem which undermines women's status that I have identified during this research work in Buchi Emecheta's novels is gender discrimination. African women have been relegated to a position of secondary importance by their male counterparts who prevent them from most privileges they may profit by in society. This makes me plead for a re-evaluation of African women's image. That's why I make some suggestions to help improve women's status.

The improvement of women's status especially that of African women implies that they have equal rights like their men counterparts, that is to say, right to life, right to sane marital life, right to education and to employment. Women should not be victim of any form of traditional impediment. Neither should they be victim of any form of oppression. Men and women should have equal opportunities for their development in society.

As I have said in my foreword, this research work should not be seen as one trying to promote feminism, but one asking for re-examination of African women's status. The main message here is that we should attempt to recover those practices in African society that elevated the status of women to positions in which they play complementary role to their male counterparts, while recognizing that there are practices which have to be abolished or minimized to allow women to fully participate, without discrimination in the life of nation.

Honourable members of the jury, I cannot conclude this presentation without talking about the different difficulties I've encountered during this research work. I confess that I faced a lot of difficulties. The first one has to do with how to accommodate and harmonize my teaching job with the research work successfully. Another difficulty, and the greatest one, is the untimely and continuous power cuts. However, I have tried to do my best to finish this

dissertation. I don't think it is a perfect one. Any weaknesses or mistakes in this research work should not be attributed to my supervisor; I bear the entire responsibility.

Eminent members of the panel, this work requires your help to be improved. That is why your remarks, contributions, suggestion and advice are welcome.

Thank you very much for all