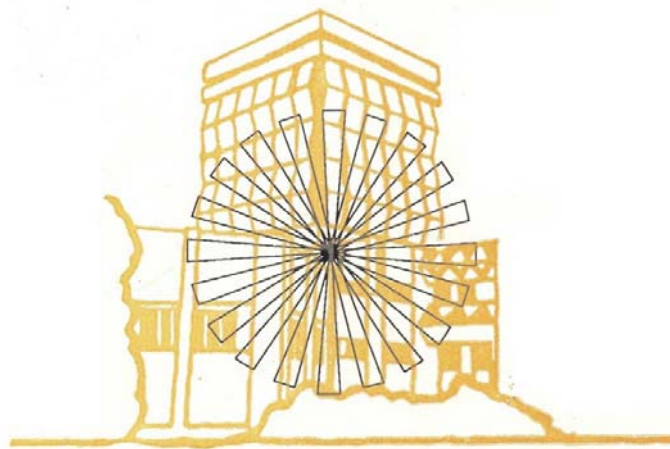


**GROUPE D'ÉTUDES LINGUISTIQUES
ET LITTÉRAIRES
G. E. L. L.**

**UNIVERSITÉ GASTON BERGER
DE SAINT-LOUIS, SÉNÉGAL**



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In memoriam pour feux Hilairé BOUKA et El Hadj Mansour NLANG

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ÉDITORIAL

La revue *Langues et Littératures* qui a été bâtie avec beaucoup de difficultés liées à l'environnement économique pas du tout favorable en Afrique en général et au Sénégal en particulier, fait son petit bonhomme de chemin. Comme un roseau, elle plie sans rompre : elle a été frappée de plein fouet par le décès prématuré au mois d'août 2005 de son Secrétaire de Rédaction Dr. Hilaire Bouka. Ce numéro dix qui lui est dédié ne pourrait même pas récompenser l'énorme travail qu'il a toujours abattu pour que la revue paraisse à temps. Cloué au lit par la maladie, son absence sur le terrain s'est fait ressentir par le neuvième numéro qui a accusé un retard de parution de sept mois. A ce triste événement, s'ajoute la mort de notre jeune collègue Dr. Mansour Niang, survenue sur la route Dakar/Saint-Louis au mois de décembre 2005. Son article intitulé « *De l'espace local à l'espace global dans la géopoétique de Léopold Sédar Senghor* » que vous trouvez dans ce numéro est à titre posthume. Que la terre de nos ancêtres leur soit légère!

Ce dixième numéro consacre à *Langues et Littératures* une certaine maturité. Comme toujours, il s'y dégage le caractère diversifié des thèmes et des langues (français, anglais, espagnol) qui reflète sa bonne réputation sur le plan national et international. Les études linguistiques sont illustrées par Bede Kouamé et Yao Emmanuel Kouamé qui font des incursions dans la société ivoirienne en procédant à des analyses des langues véhiculaires que sont le français ivoirien et le baoulé-n'zikpli, l'une des langues nationales de la Côte d'Ivoire. Ils sont suivis dans ces études par leurs compatriotes Djédji Hilaire Bohui et Affané Virginie Kouassi qui fondent leurs recherches sur la fiction de Ahmadou Kourouma. Si Bohui expose la position de Kourouma sur la crise socio-politique de la Côte d'Ivoire, Kouassi s'interroge sur sa création romanesque. Ce questionnement sur la société ivoirienne qui est en train de vivre une crise aiguë de croissance sociale, s'accroît avec les réflexions de N'goran-Poame sur la restitution de la guerre civile par la presse. Cette situation tragique de la Côte d'Ivoire est théorisée en d'autres termes par Boubacar Camara qui pose le problème de la *douleur* et de la *souffrance* dans le récit. Mais Célestin Dadié apporte une note d'espoir lorsqu'il constate dans son étude que « *l'écriture sur les civilisations nègres [est] un acte de création littéraire, un acte de foi et un centre d'intérêt capital.* » Ceci est d'autant plus vrai que l'histoire humaine est faite des hauts des bas.

La littérature produite par les femmes occupe une place non négligeable: Akendengue, dans une étude contrastive, met en relief

la création romanesque de la britannique George Eliot et la gabonaise Angèle Rawiri qui, apparemment, n'ont rien de commun. Mais il réussit par une technique bien connue chez Gérard Genette à trouver des similitudes dans la structure, le temps et les personnages. Quant à Mamadou Bâ, dans une étude de quatre romans de la célèbre romancière nigériane Buchi Emecheta, il procède une certaine réévaluation de l'image de la femme africaine à travers la maternité. Mais ce point de vue africain est contredit par la position de Tanhossou-Akibode dans son étude de la société hispanique du XIXe siècle où la femme est considérée comme un « simple objet de désir et d'échange social : le mariage. » Ce qui semble être une position européenne sur le destin de la femme est reprise avec force dans la présentation de l'œuvre de Calixthe Béyala par Cécile Dolisane-Ebossé : la violence textuelle et sexuelle font un démontage systématique de la société phallocratique dans laquelle se trouvent confinées les femmes des sociétés dites modernes.

La question méthodologique de transmission des connaissances dans la langue française est illustrée par Bemmo qui s'appuie sur le cas du Cameroun où le structuralisme a, sans ménagement, supplanté la grammaire narrative. Sans pour autant prôner le retour systématique de la grammaire « traditionnelle », Bemmo milite pour une certaine cohabitation Cette question est d'actualité d'autant plus qu'en France, au niveau de l'enseignement primaire, pour ne citer que ce cas, la méthode syllabique longtemps décriée serait en train d'être réhabilitée. Ce problème de transmission de l'outil du dialogue qu'est la langue est traité du point de vue philosophique par Gaye. Il invite à une promotion de l'interculturalité qui serait favorisée par une mise au service de tous d'un langage approprié. Enfin, Mansour Niang nous laisse son deuxième article (le premier dans la *Revue camerounaise des sciences humaines appliquées* étant sous presses) dans lequel il porte une réflexion profonde sur le poète et homme d'Etat que fut Senghor.

A tous nos fidèles lecteurs et chercheurs, la revue *Langues et Littératures* vous souhaite une bonne et heureuse année de recherche 2006.

Pr. Mosé CHIMOUN
Directeur du Centre de Recherche
Groupe d'Études Linguistiques et Littéraires (G.E.L.L)

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**FROM WOMANHOOD TO MOTHERHOOD: A RE-
EVALUATED IMAGE OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN**

Mamadou BA *

Résumé

*Cet article démontre qu'à travers la littérature africaine anglophone, il y a une réévaluation de l'image de la femme africaine. Il montre, d'une part, les multiples désavantages sociaux auxquels les femmes font face dans nos sociétés particulièrement patriarcales. D'autre part, il met l'accent sur la maternité qui contribue, pour une grande part, à élever le statut de la femme africaine. Basé sur **The Joys of Motherhood, The Slave Girl, Second Class Citizen** et **Gwandolen** de l'écrivaine nigériane Buchi Emecheta, cet article montre qu'il y a désormais une nouvelle tendance qui consiste à dépeindre la femme africaine de façon globalement positive.*

Introduction

For many years, African women have been relegated to a position of secondary importance by their male counterparts. This is valid particularly for the Igbo women Emecheta depicts in most of her works. For Marie Linton Umeh, the lives of Igbo women are carefully regulated by traditional laws: "Igbo women are enslaved to Igbo traditions which subjugate them to certain customs."¹ That situation stems mainly from the nature of African societies which are mostly patriarchal, except for the Akan society in Ghana which is matrilineal. This, in return, was reflected in the various literary productions which were mostly issued by men who occupied the foreground of literature.

It is only in the 1960s, with the birth of what was labelled as "Onitsha Market Literature" in Nigeria, that some women saw their writings published. In fact, this was possible because those writings delved deep into the social problems of the mutating Nigerian society. That development of female writings may even be

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¹ Marie Linton Umeh. "A Study of Buchi Emecheta's Double Yoke" in *Ngambika : Studies on African Women Literature*. (edited by Carole B. Davies et al). Trenton: African World Press, 1986, p.173.

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considered as the real starting point of what is now known as African female literature. Emmanuel Obiechima states that Onitsha Market Literature is “an integral, if not unique and starting, part of the West African creative scene.”² The main characteristics of that literature were its cheapness for publications on the one hand, and, on the other hand, its flexibility concerning the many rules that were usually referred to as signs of literariness.

But even though most of the authors of Onitsha Market Literature remained unknown to the large public, some of them succeeded in making their way through. This was particularly favourable to female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo among others. They tagged along with their male counterparts like Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah or Ngugi Wa Thiong’O in their pointing out of the various injustices prevailing in African societies. Their writings became thus their weapons, the tools they used to send their messages and express their ideas. This is reminiscent of the Bakhtinian view of language as a means of self expression. As Omar Sougou states:

*Language /.../ appears as a system that reflects ideology; the speaking subject is constituted by a hierarchy of languages which are expressive of ideology. Ideology is inherent and apparent in daily practice of language and in literary discourse.*³

The last sentence of the above quotation is very important in the sense that it justifies the various issues developed in the literary productions, mainly the treatment of female characters by male writers and vice-versa. This relationship between men and women expressed through literature has led us to the hypothesis that even though those relationships may vary, there is a tendency to paint a better picture of African women. As a matter of fact, we can split our hypothesis into two sub-hypotheses:

1. female characters are at social disadvantage in their relations to male characters in various ways: particularly as daughters and sisters on the one hand, and as wives on the other.

² Emmanuel Obiechima. *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, p.1.

³ Omar Sougou. *Writing Across Cultures: Gender Politics and Difference in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta*. New York: Rodopi, 2002, p.6. [References to this book will now appear as WAC.]

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2. there is a re-evaluated image of female characters through African literature.

These two points will constitute the main axes around which we will centre our analysis.

When referring to the relationships within the family, we notice that there are some specific rules that are established in accordance with the traditions of the society. Consequently, the African societies being mostly agrarian ones, the main concern of heads of families is to have as many male children as possible. This is equivalent to having some more valuable hands which would contribute to improving the crops and, hence, the richness of the family. That importance of the crops appears through the important fiest that is organised every year in Umuofia. The crops are also associated with virility, with manliness. In that respect, Rose Ure Mezu writes:

The society that Achebe is describing (1850-1900) is an agrarian one in which the crop – the yam – is synonymous with virility. Achebe explains that this all-important crop [stands] for manliness, and he who [can] feed his family on yams from one harvest to another [is] a very great man indeed. . . . Yam, the king of crops, [is] a very exacting king [...]. Consequently, to produce an abundant harvest, the traditional farmer needs a good workforce. Women constitute (and still do) the core of the rural workforce – farming, tending animals, nurturing children, among other activities.⁴

Therefore, the agriculture-based African societies require more male children for more crops on the one hand. On the other hand, male children also constitute a means whereby the name of the family is perpetuated.

In effect, women mostly adopt the family names of their husbands once they get married. Thus, with male children, the perpetuation of the family name is ensured. This is clearly expressed in *The Joys of Motherhood* through Nwakusor, one of the male characters, who accuses Adaku of being unable to perpetuate Nnaife's family name:

Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended

⁴ Rose Ure Mezu. "Women in Achebe's World." Document Internet à l'adresse suivante: <http://www.uga.edu/~womanist/1995/mezu.html>. (10/12/2005)

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*his life on this round of his visiting the earth. I know you have children, but they are girls, who in a few years' time will go and build another man's immortality.*⁵

Thus, for this man the fact of having male children ensures immortality to the husband whose family name will be “kept alive.”

All these elements cannot remain without effects in the sense that they have entailed among heads of families a favouritism for their male children. This appears through various privileges given to male children. Emecheta hints at the point in *The Joys of Motherhood* where she explores the inter-relationships within the African traditional family. In this novel, Nnaife's senior wife, Nnu Ego, faces that favouritism exercised by her husband among their children. The males, Oshia and Adim, have all their school fees paid. All necessary measures are taken to ensure them a good start in life. Oshia goes to the United States of America for further studies, while Adim is sent to Canada. At the same time, the daughters remain at home where they are taught the best ways to earn money, particularly by selling firewood.

As a matter of fact, brothers have all advantages over their sisters. In *The Slave Girl* for example, Ojebeta's brother, Okolie, has all privileges over her. He does not hesitate to sell her to Ma Palagada, a wealthy and successful woman trader. Moreover, Okolie sells his sister for the minimum price one could ask for the bride price just in order to afford a costume for the traditional *Ulolco* – a ceremony showing that he has now become a full adult.

However, Emecheta finds an alternative to that situation through Nnu Ego's co-wife, Adaku. Contrarily to Nnu Ego who is in a certain way the representative of the traditional submissive wife, Adaku appears as a successful woman whose eagerness to ensure the success of her children is without doubt. Adaku is very ambitious for her daughters whom she promises to give a better life:

I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future. Many rich Yoruba families send their daughters to school these days; I shall do the same with mine. (JOM, p.168)

Emecheta asserts that women themselves can also put an end to the sexual discrimination exercised in families. As Adaku states in the

⁵ Buchi Emecheta. *The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann African Writers Series, 1988, p.166. [References to this book will now appear as *JOM*.]

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novel, it is women who put themselves into such a disadvantageous situation:

[/.../ the more I think about it the more I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own. (JOM, p.169).

Through Adaku, Emecheta recaptures what is lost in the character Nnu Ego: a dissenting woman who struggles so much that she “turns into the ‘monstrous’ or ‘criminal’ woman in the eyes of tradition.” (*WAC*, p.108). However, all the efforts made by Adaku are tarnished by her decision to resume prostitution so as to be able to satisfy her needs and those of her daughters (*JOM*, p.168). In fact, Adaku is blinded by her will to succeed in her life. This can be regarded as a means used by the author to epitomise the importance Adaku gives to her success and, more importantly, to the success of her daughters. At this particular stage in the novel, the author shifts from the stereotyped image of the daughter representing richness for her father alone. The author shows that daughters are a richness not only for their fathers, but also for their mothers. Emecheta depicts Adaku’s anger and disappointment both entailed by Nwakusor’s words which actually showed her that she was no more but a woman. That remark made by Nwakusor, and which reflects the mentality of men, is another means used by the author to lay the emphasis on the importance they attach to male children. This is what Adaku has understood: “I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no son.” (*JOM*, p.169)

Moreover, daughters are for their fathers a source of riches; which is symbolised by the bride price. In effect, as depicted in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the decision of the father is fundamental for the marriage of his daughter. That decision is all the more important as it is the father himself who receives the bride price for his daughter. As a result, the father’s decision may be influenced by his own interests. This can be noticed in *The Joys of Motherhood* where Nnaife interferes in the marriage of his daughter Kehinde.

Kehinde who loves the butcher’s son faces the refusal of her father who wants to choose a husband for her. Nnaife’s decision is influenced by the fact that he considers that the butcher and his family are not rich enough to give him a huge bride price. This led to a chaotic situation because Nnaife was sentenced to a five-year imprisonment for threatening to kill the butcher. There appears the materialistic bent of men with regard to marriage. That materialism

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contributes to conferring a mercantile aspect to marriage in the sense that men seize that opportunity to obtain money and other profits.

In fact, that conception men have of the bride price turns women into some kind of goods possessed by men. Women are in some way an investment from which men expect more profits through the bride price. We have in *The Slave Girl* an illustration of that image of women as an investment with Okolie who believed that he was putting his sister into a much more suitable situation:

*He had never sold anyone before, and now he persuaded himself that what he was about to do was not selling in the actual sense. He was giving his sister away into the keeping of this rich lady, and getting some money for her so that, when she grew up, she might be given to a suitable husband and could collect the bride price.*⁶

Okolie is establishing a connexion between his sister's life and that of Ma Palagada. In so doing, he assimilates Ojebeta with the richness of Ma Palagada from whom he expects a better life and a brighter future for her sister. For him, selling Ojebeta to Ma Palagada is synonymous with ensuring her "a suitable husband", that is a husband who would be able to give him a huge bride price. It is worth pointing out the meaning Okolie gives to the expression "a suitable husband", because for him the suitability of a husband depends on the latter's ability to give an important bride price. That 'commodification'⁷ of the African woman by their male counterparts is also shown in *The Bride Price* through the character Aku-nna. As Sougou explains, the meaning of Aku-nna's name expresses without doubt that 'commodification' of women:

*Emecheta gives the heroine the name Aku-nna, which is a derivation of Ojebeta's father's praise-name in The Slave Girl, Aku nna yi ka meaning "your father's wealth is the greatest" /.../. But The Bride Price makes Aku-nna signify "father's wealth": a debunking metaphor for **patriarchal expectations with regard to daughters**. (WAC, p.67) [I underline]*

Sougou points out the main cause of men's attitude towards women in general, and towards their daughters in particular. That cause – patriarchal expectations – is very important in that Igbo society Emecheta depicts because of the place it occupies in traditions. The

⁶ Buchi Emecheta. *The Slave Girl*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1995, p.31. [References to this book will now appear as TSG.]

⁷ We borrow the term from Omar Sougou (WAC, p.59).

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status of daughters appears thus clearly in the above quotation: they are a source of richness for their fathers. With the bride price, they are definitely linked to their fathers on the one hand, and to their husbands and uncles on the other hand. The same situation is valid for Nnu Ego whose name is also full of meaning for his father Agbadi. Indeed, Agbadi gives his daughter this name not only because he loves her, but also because he sees through her a future richness:

He bent down and peeped at the day-old child wrapped and kept warm by the fireside and remarked: "This child is priceless, more than twenty bags of cowries. I think that should really be her name, because she is a beauty and she is mine. Yes, 'Nnu Ego': twenty bags of cowries." (JOM, p.26).

Agbadi uses the expression "she is mine" which means that his daughter represents richness for him. Even the fact that Agbadi repays his daughter's bride price to free her from her husband contributes to turning women into mere properties. This is suggested by the diminishing conception Igbo people have in *Second Class Citizen*: " /.../ In Africa, among the Igbo in particular, a girl was a little more than a piece of property."⁸ The comparison with a piece of property once again puts that 'commodification' at its climax.

Arlette Chemain-Degrange gives a more positive view of that conception men have of women and of the bride price. For her, the bride price is a compensation for the father who, when giving his daughter, loses some probable hands that would help him cultivate the land:

La dot, dans sa conception ancienne, se justifiait économiquement. Le père de la jeune fille, sur le point de perdre un membre productif de sa famille, /.../ recevait du prétendant une compensation.⁹

Chemain-Degrange moves thus from the sexist point of view characterising the patriarchal societies, to a more sociological and economic explanation of the bride price. From this standpoint, that

⁸ Buchi Emecheta. *Second Class Citizen*. New York: George Braziller, 1975, p.37. [References to this book will now appear as SCC.]

⁹ Arlette Chemain-Degrange. *Emancipation féminine et roman africain*. Abidjan : N.E.A. : 1980, pp.143-144. The ancient acceptance of the bride price was justified at the economical level. The girl's father who was about to give away a productive member of his family received a compensation from the husband. [My translation. The title will appear as EF for further references.]

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mercantile aspect of the bride price becomes then logical. However, the daughter still remains an object of transaction.

But at least Agbadi as well as Nnaife express the love they have for their daughters. Similarly, in *The Bride Price* Okonkwo does not hesitate to show his love for his niece. This is different from what happens in *Gwendolen*. Indeed, instead of negotiating his niece's bride price just as Okonkwo does in *The Bride Price*, Uncle Johnny sexually abuses the seven-year old Gwendolen¹⁰. She is then once more abused by Winston.

In fact, Winston uses the authority he has over Gwendolen to oblige her to have sexual intercourse with him: "He remembered vaguely that when he was overcome by desire he had begged her to him herself, **because he was her Daddy**, and if she loved him he would not deny him the little favour." (*Gwendolen*, p.122) [I underline]. Consequently, male characters appear in *Gwendolen* as oppressors who cause into the female characters' psyche a traumatic vision of male characters who are now assimilated with oppression and disgrace. It appears also in *The Joys of Motherhood* where Nnu Ego considers that soldiers kill, rape and disgrace women and children (*JOM*, p. 88). That depiction of Winston's animalistic instinct is meant to highlight the absurdity of his act. Moreover, the omniscient narrator expresses a disapproval of the attitude of Gwendolen while she was being abused. Gwendolen naively believed what Winston told her, but also what she heard previously from Uncle Johnny: "But Gwendolen remembered Uncle Johnny. He had said to her 'Every gal done done it. Dat's why they're girls.'" (*Gwendolen*, p.122). The last part of this quotation illustrates once more the image men have of women whom they consider as mere objects. Those words uttered by Uncle Johnny, combined with Winston's remark on the privileges he has over Gwendolen, is a device used by Emecheta to express one fact: for men, women are just objects of pleasure which they can use whenever the need arises. The narrator does not approve such a situation; which urges her to blame Gwendolen: "Men say all kinds of nonsense when roused. No woman with her head rightly screwed on believed such rubbish. But Gwendolen did. The girl was stupid." (*Gwendolen*, p.122). The reader may feel the angry tone of the narrator who emphasizes the stupidity of Gwendolen. The last

¹⁰ Buchi Emecheta. *Gwendolen*. London: Heinemann, 1994, pp.12-13. [This title is not abbreviated in the text.]

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sentence of the quotation is meant to urge the reader to accept the narrator's opinion concerning Gwendolen's attitude.

That stupidity is at its climax when the narrator depicts the unexpected reaction of Winston after his shameful act. In effect, Winston who was abusing his daughter is disappointed when he realizes that the latter has already had sex with other men: "You allow men to do this to you before, June-June?" the enraged father cried. He thought he was going to be the first. What a disappointment." (*Gwendolen*, p.123). Winston's attitude is all the more stupid that in the Igbo society Emecheta depicts in her novels, daughters represent a wealth for fathers. This appears through the discussion between Winston and Mr Ilochina:

A daughter belonged to the father, her bride price was his. If the daughter was chaste, it would enhance her father's position and make him richer. So why should a father wish to ruin his own wealth?
(*Gwendolen*, p.120)

In pointing out that paradox, Emecheta emphasizes the disgrace women undergo. Winston as well as Uncle Johnny give another meaning to the status of women as daughters. In effect, in letting women appear as mere objects of sexual pleasure, they tarnish men's relationship with women. This is also one of the various devices used by Emecheta to force the reader see how disgraceful women's life is because of patriarchy and materialism. Consequently, the name of Gwendolen is associated with that tarnished and downgraded image of African women.

However, as Sougou points out, Emecheta does not focus on the meanings she gives to her female characters's names. Sougou considers that attitude of the writer as a device she uses to express her denunciation of the patriarchy characterising her society. For that purpose, Sougou writes:

The refusal to allow these names to mean what they are traditionally designed to denote is part of a female writer's resistance. It consists in subverting traditional discourse and the patriarchal ideology that is Emecheta's target. This deliberate tampering with names is central to her strategy of contestation.
(*WAC*, p.100)

Therefore, Emecheta overshadows the real meaning of the names of her female characters for a personal reason: that of epitomising the situation of injustice in which they are put by society and by men. Sougou reinforces his argumentation:

It is suggested that Okonkwo is likely to negotiate his niece's bride price with Chike's father despite his slave status because he needs the

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money to acquire a higher title, that of Eze. Thus the bride price, which at the beginning was said to be destined to pay her brother's school fees, changes function and beneficiary. This transfer and Akunna's name, "father's wealth", are textual strategies to undermine traditional practices that oppress women in order to secure them as male property. (WAC, p.67)

Sougou uses the expression "to secure them as male property" which perfectly corroborates the "patriarchal expectations with regard to daughters." It is worth pointing the similarity between the reason why Okonkwo plans to negotiate his niece's bride price in *The Bride Price*, and the other reason which leads Okolie to sell his sister Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl*. In effect, in the same way as Okonkwo hints at acquiring the title of *Eze*, Okolie also wants to be able to take part in the ceremony through which he becomes a mature man.

That status of women as goods is also highlighted by the possibility men have to inherit their brother's wives. This situation reinforces the case of Ojebeta who is sold by her brother for a 'futile' reason, that of buying a costume for the ceremony of *Ulolco*. In fact, the origin of that practice can be set as far back as the times of the Hebrew Prophet, Moses. In effect, that practice which was known as *levirate marriage* was a law imposed by Moses and which urged a man to marry the childless widow of his deceased brother. It was a way of safeguarding the alliance between the families of which the husbands were the representatives.

But in many African societies, we notice a misinterpretation of that principle because it is used in such a way that the wife is regarded as part of the commodities involved in the inheritance. In that respect, Samba Traoré writes:

A ce niveau, on note beaucoup de confusion sur les significations du lévirat dans les coutumes africaines, parce qu'à tort, et même dans les documents officiels de recensement, on l'a appelé héritage de femmes.¹¹

¹¹ Balla Traore. "L'institution du lévirat dans les coutumes sénégalaises: un héritage de la tradition ou de l'Islam?". Source Internet : <http://professeurtraore.over-blog.com/articel-204872.html> (10/12/2005).

At this level, we notice that there is a confusion about the meanings of the levirate marriage in the African traditions because even in the official documents used in population counting, it is referred to as an inheritance of women. [My translation]

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Therefore, the levirate marriage, as practised in African societies, is different from the original point of view on the one hand, but also from the religious stance on the other hand. In effect, the religious standpoint, particularly the Islam religion, allows the woman to accept or not the principle. Her opinion is a *sine qua non* condition for the practice of the levirate marriage which should not be imposed upon her: “Si dans le principe coranique, on traduit le concept par héritage, il n’en demeure pas moins que le Coran précise que **P’avis de la femme est demandé.**”¹²[I underline]

According to the Islamic religion, the members of the family propose a leviratical husband to the widow after a period of forty days – four periods of ten days – known as the period of widowhood. We should point out that she can either accept or reject the proposal.¹³ This was practiced in Senegal, for example, among the Pulaar, the Wolof and the Soninke. But the arrival of the Islamic religion contributed to the legitimation of levirate marriages. However, we notice that despite the Islamic stance which confers more freedom of choice to the woman, many African societies put forward some patriarchal ideologies to deprive her of that privilege. Achebe proceeds differently in the depiction of African women’s situation. In effect, Achebe shows through his writings a more positive image of African women. The main device he uses is a contrastive depiction which allows him to highlight the injustice they suffer from as well as the important role they play in reality in their society.

In *Things Fall Apart* for example, we have first the image of the downgraded woman who does not have to express herself, unless she is asked to. Moreover, unsuccessful men are regarded as women (*aghala*), which suggests that women are associated with failure. However, those women also regain their identity thanks to their role not only as wives, but also as shelters for men. In effect, the wife is regarded as the head of her household. The first wife, particularly, has more privileges conferred to her by her status of senior wife. All her co-spouses are compelled to show their respect towards her.

Another aspect of the re-evaluation of the African woman lies in the concept of *Nneka* meaning ‘Mother is Supreme.’ In reality, what makes the woman supreme here is that the fact of being mother confers to the woman a new and more positive status. She

¹² Balla Traoré. *op. cit.*. Even if the principle of the Koran the term is translated as inheritance, the Koran does precise that **the opinion of the woman is required.**

¹³ Idem.

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becomes more than a 'simple' woman. In effect, the importance given to motherhood is, as previously mentioned, related to the place occupied by children – particularly male children – in the Igbo agrarian society. In other words, the woman who gives birth to those males who are supposed to help increase the crops becomes thus the main source of (man)-power for their society. As a matter of fact, through the children they give birth to, they bear the future and richness of society. Therefore, the woman is associated with the image of the Earth Goddess who symbolises fertility, and with that of the Priestess who protects society. The woman can then be regarded as a supreme being in the sense that she is associated with those deities who are at the core of the society's beliefs. This is all the more important as the power of Umuofia lies mainly in that of the earth goddess Ani. In effect, with her supernatural power, she protects Umuofia thanks to the *agadi-nwayi*, a medicine she uses. Because of that protectionist attitude, Ani is regarded as a mother for the people of Umuofia: "Ani, the earth goddess, the owner of all land, the source of all fertility is identified with motherhood. She plays a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity." (*TFA*, p.33)

Moreover, the shift from the status of a 'simple' woman to that of a mother entails also a betterment of her situation. Motherhood can thus be referred to as the main criterion for a woman's consideration in society. This image of the woman as the bearer of the society's future appears also in Wole Soyinka's play 'The Strong Breed'.¹⁴ In this work highly philosophical and full of symbols, the woman gives birth to the child who is supposed to purify the society and protect it against all evils. The responsibility given to the woman is all the more important as the latter inevitably dies while giving birth to that child. The woman becomes thus a sacrifice made for the sake of saving society.

That status of the saviour of society also appears through Eunice in Achebe's *A Man of the People*¹⁵ and through Warriŋga in Ngũgĩ's *Devil on the Cross*. Both female characters are given the task of freeing society from the oppressors represented by some male characters. Eunice shoots down Chief Koko, one of the murderers of her fiancé Max. The choice of Eunice's social status is not

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka. 'The Strong Breed' in *Collected Plays*. Volume 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973. [The title will henceforth be abbreviated as *SB*.]

¹⁵ Chinua Achebe. *A Man of the People*. United Kingdom: African Writers Series, 1988.

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fortuitous: she is a lawyer, and as such, she renders the verdict of her own justice by suppressing the man who symbolises oppression. In *Devil on the Cross*, Warrĩnga who has been a victim of sexual assaults from Boss Kĩhara first and then from Rich Old Man from Ngorika, decides to put an end to oppression. She shot down the Rich Old Man so as 'to save many people, whose lives will not be ruined by words of honey and perfume.'¹⁶

However, despite that new image of African women who appear as liberators, one can notice that the social disadvantage they are victim of is almost at all levels of society. Firstly, as daughters, their fathers obtain all profits attached to their marriage. Secondly, as sisters they have less advantages than their brothers who have all prerogatives over them. Finally, as wives they undergo the coercive power of their husbands whose main purpose is to prove their manliness. Emecheta, as well as many writers of her generation, denounces that imbalanced situation based mainly upon patriarchal principles. Emecheta's depiction of that situation of African woman is an important step forward in that denunciation. As a matter of fact, she puts forward a new and different way of depicting African women's condition by giving her female characters a more positive role in society. It is in that respect that some of them appear as conscious of their 'servitude' in relation to their male counterparts – we can mention the case of Ojebeta in *The Joys of Motherhood* – while some others decide to fight for their fulfilment – Adah in Emecheta's *In the Ditch*, Eunice in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Warrĩnga in Ngũgĩ's *Devil on the Cross*, etc.

The Joys of Motherhood, as the title may suggest, is the most important work in which Emecheta fully develops that aspect of the re-evaluation of African women in relation to their status as mothers. However, despite all the attempts made by Nnu Ego to achieve that status of a 'free' woman, she ends in a situation which does not actually honour the African woman. In effect, Nnu Ego dies by the roadside, without any help: "/.../ Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her." (*JOM*, p.224). Therefore, she symbolises to an extent the social disadvantage which seems to follow the African woman all over her life. The importance attached to motherhood appears also in the paradoxical situation in which the narrator puts Nnu Ego. Her death

¹⁶ Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'O. *Devil on the Cross*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1987, p.253.

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can be seen as an outcome of the emotional breakdown she suffered from and which results from the fact that her sons did not actually react as they were expected to. In effect, despite all the sacrifices Nnu Ego made in order to ensure her sons a good start in life, none of them, contrarily to the daughters, showed signs of interest towards her while they were in America and in Canada. Her disappointment is then so strong that she can no longer bear it. The breakdown is thus unavoidable for that woman who struggles for her children:

/.../ Nnu Ego, similarly, was going downhill very fast. It was not that she was physically poor; her daughters sent help once in a while. However, 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.

For a while Nnu Ego bore it all without reaction, until her senses started to give way. She became vague, and people pointed out that she had never been strong emotionally. (JOM, p.224)

Therefore, Nnu Ego seems to have lost the battle of motherhood. But the narrator sides again with her by placing the focus not on what should be her life or on the way she died, but rather on the quality of her burial. Indeed, all her children – both sons and daughters – came back home to ensure her a decent burial (JOM, p.224). And even though they reacted a bit late, their act contributed to restoring the image of their mother, and that of all African women of whom she is the representative. Moreover, through the attitude of the children who feel sorry for being unable to ensure their mother a good life before her death, the narrator urges the reader to hope that they would have reacted positively if she lived longer. Therefore, the narrator clears the children of their feeling of guilt as far as their mother's death is concerned.

It is also a way of emphasising the power of patriarchy which nurtures such a diminishing situation African women are in. Nnu Ego's tragic end can also be regarded as a means used by the author to show that despite all liberation movements women are engaged in – 'womanism', feminism, etc – their status is still almost the same, particularly for those who are unable to take clear-cut decisions as far as their destiny is concerned. At the same time, Emecheta illustrates the weight of traditions that restrain the reactions of some African women. Thus, there are a number of rules and values that need to be questioned in order to help African

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women regain and keep their identity. For that purpose, their own involvement at all levels is unavoidable. This is an interpretation we can have of the decision taken by many African authors to portray differently their female characters.

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