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Impact of Christianity on African Women in Buchi Emecheta's Novels

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Abstract: The African society is one of the societies with rich culture and traditions. Apart from the indigenous religion of Africa, Christianity and Islam are worshiped as the major religions of the African society. Literature reflects a great amount of influence of religions on the existing societies, people and cultures. African literature often mirrors the clash of indigenous religion with Christianity. In the writings of African authors one can find the elements of Christian beliefs and practices. The present paper, however, is focused on the African woman novelist Buchi Emecheta's selected four novels: *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave-Girl* (1977) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). The paper attempts to discuss the impact of Christianity on the social and cultural aspects of the African society with special focus on African women. The findings reveal the positive as well as negative impacts of the new religion on African people and on the position of African women through the characters present in the selected novels. With the medium of writing and through Christianity, Emecheta seek to educate her society and improve upon the position of the African women.

Keywords: Africa, African women, Christianity, Igbo society, patriarchy, post-colonialism, feminism, womanism

1. Introduction

Africa is one of the largest and populous continents of the world with many religions. Of all the religions, three major religions followed in Africa are the indigenous African religion, Islam and Christianity. The African societies were greatly influenced by these religions. The indigenous religion of Africa practiced the worshipping of Gods and Goddesses in the form of idols and ancient spirits. The traditional purpose of worshipping was to protect themselves from bad and evil spirits and also from poverty and bad fortunes. The religion encouraged the African people to follow certain traditional rites and sacrifices to please the spirits. The indigenous religion was followed and practiced by the Africans generation after generation since the ancient days. In the ancient days in Africa, the African women occupied dignified positions as the indigenous religion conferred upon them the power to voice their opinions in major decisions of their societies. On the other hand, Islam was imported by Arab traders via Egypt in Africa in the 9th century. Islam attracted a good number of followers due to similarities with indigenous religion of Africa. Christianity as a religion began to exist quite early in Africa even before Islam around 4th century. Both the religions were spread far and wide in Africa by 1000 A.D. But Christianity became a major religion in Africa with the arrival of colonialism. With the intrusion of the European powers in African countries, drastic changes were witnessed in the social, political, cultural as well as economical aspects of its land. It can be stated that Africa's colonization by the European powers especially the British led to the downfall of its indigenous religion which consequently aided in the downfall of the dignified positions of its women. The European missionaries first brought Christianity into the African soil with a hidden political agenda i.e., to aid in robbing off of all the natural resources and rule Africa. In the nineteenth century, the Christian missionaries did this by

working upon the loop holes created by the indigenous African religion which was strict and indifferent to the lower caste people and favorable to rich and high caste people. The indifference led to the attraction of the outcaste people in the new religion which offered them recognition, honor and education. This is one of the main reasons of Africa embracing Christianity as their major religion. Education became a powerful and a political tool in educating the African people by the colonizers for their administrative purpose as well as to enable them to read the Bible and spread Christianity far and wide in Africa. Gradually, Christianity had influenced the lives of many Africans with various opportunities and benefits and at the same time, it had made a huge impact on the lives of African women as the new religion furthered the politics of patriarchy which colonialism had ingrained on the minds of African men.

In the history of literature, there has been a close relationship between religion and literature throughout the world. As literature mirrors the society, it reflects upon the various cultures and religions existing in a particular society. As for instance, the Indian literature is replete with its indigenous traditional Hinduism and its practices existed in the Indian societies. In the context of the literatures of Africa, it can be said that Chinua Achebe's magnum opus *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has presented a realistic picture of Christianity brought by colonialism in the nineteenth century in Africa. The novel records the gradual embracing of Christianity over the indigenous religion by the African people. Obierika, an elderly friend of Okonkwo states in *Things Fall Apart*:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart ([1], pp. 124-5)

It also reflects the clash of the two religions which finally led to the disintegration of harmony and peace in their culture symbolized by the downfall of its hero Okonkwo who at the end of the novel commits suicide by hanging himself from a tree.

Apart from the canonical writings of African male authors, there has been a significant growth in the contribution of Africa's literature by women writers. One such powerful woman writer is the Nigerian born author Buchi Emecheta who has more than twenty literary contributions. Her novels also portray the impact of Christianity upon the lives of African people but more specifically upon African women. Her bold style of writing attracts a good number of criticisms for being a feminist but she rejects such label and embraces a more humanistic label of being a womanist.

Buchi Emecheta, full name Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta, was born on July 21, 1944 in Yaba, near Lagos, to her Igbo parents- Jeremy Nwabudike and Alice Okwukwu Emecheta. Buchi Emecheta was married to Sylvester Onwordi in 1960 at the tender age of sixteen. In 1962, with her two children, she joined her husband in England who went for further studies. She gave birth to three more children consecutively within a short span of time. She had five children in six years of marriage. She had a rough married life. She first started working as a Library Officer in the British Museum from 1965 to 1969. She left her abusive husband in 1966 when he burnt her first manuscript "Bride Price". She then took up writing seriously as her career and published her first novel *In the Ditch* (1972). She received the Daughter of Mark Twain Award for her novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) in 1975. In 1978, she received the New Statesman Jock Campbell Award for the novel *The Slave Girl* (1977). She is a recipient of the Best British Writer's Award in 1980 for her famous novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Emecheta received Doctor of literature degree from Farleigh Dickinson University in Madison, New Jersey in 1992. She published her latest novel *The New Tribe* in 2000. She is also the proprietor of her own publishing company named Ogwugwu Afor. She is a prolific woman writer from Nigeria (West Africa) who is credited with more than twenty literary works. Of all her works, her famous contributions to African literature remain *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of*

Motherhood (1979), *Destination Biafra* (1982), *The Rape of Shavi* (1983), *Gwendolen* (1989) and *The New Tribe* (2000). She now lives in her home in London.

Emecheta gives the credit of her creativity to her Big Mothers and maternal aunts since in her childhood they had inspired her with traditional folktales and stories. Her novels poignantly address the myriad problems of African women in two cultures especially one in Nigeria and another in London. According to Brenan Carol (2002), Emecheta's novels draw heavily upon Nigerian beliefs and post-colonial culture and often portray the clash that occurs when the modern world encroaches upon indigenous African value systems. Many of her works are autobiographical in nature, feminist in spirit, and portray a place in which the cruelties of European colonization endure for generations. Emecheta described her novels as "stories of the world," but from a female perspective, as she told *Essence* writer Elsie B. Washington "These women face the universal problems of poverty and oppression, and the longer they stay, no matter where they have come from originally, the more the problems become identical." [2].

Since the present study is confined to four selected chronological novels of Buchi Emecheta i.e., *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave-Girl* (1977) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), a brief summary of each novel would lend a great insight in understanding the purpose of the whole article. The novel, *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) is a prequel to her first publish novel *In the Ditch* (1972). The novel is about a struggling Black woman Adah Obi against sexism in Africa and racism in London. The novel accounts the journey of the protagonist towards her awakened life without her husband but with her five small children and writing as her career. In her journey, the protagonist faces sexual and racial discrimination for being a woman and a black. Emecheta portrays a black woman facing hard the double marginalization with determination and her exposure to education. The ultimate outcome of her separation with her husband in London not only uplifts Adah socially, economically but also psychologically from the ditch. The second novel *The Bride Price* (1976) is about a young African woman Aku-nna who dies in her first childbirth as her stepfather refuses to accept the bride price for she marries an outcaste. Emecheta questions the validity of such traditional practices and taboos that victimize women in African society. The novel also displays the traditional marriage customs of Africa, impact of Christianity in the social, traditional, cultural and administrative aspects of the African people and the relevance of paying bride price in the traditional African society. Another impressive novel of Emecheta accounting the sufferings of African women is *The Slave Girl* (1977) for which she received the New Statesman Jock Campbell Award for Commonwealth writers in 1978. It narrates a painful story of how an Igbo brother Okolie sells off his younger sister Ojebeta Ogbanje in order to obtain money for his coming of age ceremony in Ibuza. Emecheta portrays an African woman who remains a slave throughout her life, first at the hands of her parents, second at the hands of a master and third at the hands of a husband. Emecheta shows that a slave girl like Ojebeta is never free in her life in a male dominated society. The last selected novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) remains Buchi Emecheta's best novel till date. It reflects the irony of motherhood in African context. The novel is about an African woman named Nnu Ego who despite of being a barren woman in her first marriage bears as many children as nine of which seven survives (three boys and four girls). Nnu Ego dies a lonely death on the roadside with no children of her own to look after her. The title of the novel is quoted from Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru* (1966) and Emecheta has used it in an ironic way to reflect upon the other existing and possible pains of motherhood prevailing in African society and elsewhere even today. Throughout her novels, one can find Emecheta's concerted effort to reduce if not eliminate the debilitating condition of African women trapped in tradition and patriarchy. She opts to writing as a mode of resistance against sexism and racism. In her writings, she infuses the traditional African myths, practices, proverbs and symbols to lend authenticity and realism. In all the selected novels, Emecheta records the worshipping of the indigenous African religion, emergence of Christianity as a western import in the social and cultural context of African society, the positive as well as negative impacts of the new religion on African people and how it affects the position of African women.

In order to understand and evaluate the novels of Buchi Emecheta, there is a need to be familiar with and understand the applicable literary theories. To consider the literary texts by women writers requires a theory grounded on the issues and philosophy of women which is feminism- a sub part of postcolonial literary criticism. Feminism works for the emancipation of women against any form of oppression, subjugation and injustice. In the words of Pramod K. Nayar :

Feminist criticism seeks to uncover the ideology of patriarchal society in works of art. It reads literary texts for their representation of women, and argues that these representations mask socio-political oppression of the category of women by justifying this oppression and naturalizing it. For feminist, the text is a battleground where actual power relations between men and women are played out. ([3], p. 82)

Some of the foundational literary texts crucial to feminist criticism include: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) which argues that economic independence and an own separate space for writing are essential for the development of a woman to be a writer; Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) argues that woman has been ascribed with negative qualities of man thus making man the 'absolute' and woman the 'other'; Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) describes the relationship of men and women as 'sexual politics' which she defines as "power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" ([4], p. 23) and Elaine Showalter is credited with the term 'gynocriticism' as quoted by Tolan (2006) i.e., a "female centered criticism" ([5], p. 328). She identifies the major cause of not including women's writing in the mainstream literature. It is due to the criticism of women's writings by male authors and critics which was patriarchal through and through. She also identifies three phase in the history of women's writing: the feminine phase (1840-1880), the feminist phase (1880-1890) and the female phase (20th Century). Also some of the French feminist writers like the psychoanalysts Julia Kristeva and Lucy Irigaray and philosopher Helene Cixous contributed significantly in feminist literary criticism and discourse.

However, the western feminism cannot be applied as literary theory when it comes to the writings of African women writers. No matter the African women writers' literary works reflect feminist ideals and arguments; their brand of feminism is quite contrastive to western feminism. Also many African women writers themselves have denied when being called 'feminists'. They refuse the western terminology of 'feminists'. Feminism is a Eurocentric ideology led by the middle class white women in the 19th and 20th century in the European countries. The western feminism fails to address the issues of women of the Third World countries. These Third World women are socially and economically backward compared to the white women. Many critics from the Third World countries have been fighting for a new space in the literary criticism to fit in the dilemma of the women of color. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the pioneering critics in this context who has written the famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she has identified woman as the voiceless subaltern. Talking about feminism in the context of the black women of Africa, the white women have ignored to include the black women in their struggle. The black women are oppressed more than the white women, and the degree of suffering is much higher in the case of African women. The failure of western feminism in dealing with the plights of black women leads to the development of a separate 'ism' for the black women. The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group, explains in 1977 in this regard:

It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist unlike those of Black and White men. ([6], p. 14)

As a result, Black Feminism surfaced in the history of struggle of black women. Black Feminism as a movement was concerned with the oppression and struggle of African-American women in the U.S. So, a more focused theory was in dire need that would acknowledge the issues of women in Africa

or women in other Third World countries. This led to the birth of another woman based movement for the black women in Africa which was more humanistic in approach known as 'Womanism'. The term "womanist" is generally considered to have first introduced by the famous African-American novelist Alice Walker in her 1983 essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose". She defines 'womanish' as opposite to 'girlish' nature of a woman. She further defines a womanist as:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. ([7], p. xi)

The Nigerian critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi defines womanism as:

a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood ([8], p. 72)

In the clear words of Patricia Hill Collins "Black women are 'womanist' while white women are 'feminist'" ([9], p. 10). African women writers like Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa have refused to be labeled as feminists. Buchi Emecheta, in one of her essays "Feminism with a small 'f'!" writes:

I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small 'f'. ([10], p. 553)

Thus, for the study of Buchi Emecheta's novels, the theoretical framework of womanism is most appropriate as womanism works on three areas of oppression of a black woman: race, class and gender. And to study the novels from religious perspectives, womanist theology will help in understanding of the impact of Christianity on African women. Etymologically, the term "theology" means, *theos* (God) and *logos* (word, speech, expression, discourse and etc.) in Greek. Womanist theology studies the inter-relationship of women of African origin and Christianity and addresses the issues and experiences of African women and Afro-American women in day to day life caused by their race, class and gender. According to Linda E. Thomas:

Womanist theology is critical reflection upon black women's place in the world that God has created; it takes seriously black women's experience as human beings who are made in the image of God . . . affirms and critiques the positive and negative attributes of the church, the African American community, and the larger society. ([11], p. 38)

2. Analysis:

The novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1979) reflects upon the social and cultural changes brought by Christianity as a political process of colonialism by the British rulers in Africa. In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Adah Obi, an Igbo, is seen to be given western education in one of the Christian missionaries schools in Lagos namely the Methodist Girls' High School. Education is one of the opportunities offered by colonialism and Christianity in Africa. In *Encyclopedia of African Literature* (2003), Simon Gikandi highlights the opportunities offered by Christianity:

While African literature contains many memorable examples of the adverse effects of Christianity on social structures, customs, and beliefs, there is clear evidence that, more than any other institution of colonialism in Africa, the Christian mission was admired as the site of a modern culture. Christianity thus came to be represented as an ambivalent force in African society. It was admired as one of the most important forces in the modernization of Africa. This was especially the case in the field of education and literacy . . . Many Africans flocked to

Christian missions because of the opportunities they provided within the economy of colonialism. ([12], p. 153)

As the African society is a highly patriarchal one, further education of African girls is not encouraged. They are educated only up to a standard of high school in order to attract good bride price for educated brides at the time of marriage. However, the protagonist manages to get herself educated enough to visit the land of her dreams, the United Kingdom and according to her "Going to the United Kingdom must surely be like paying God a visit" ([13], p. 2). It is the attraction of the modern culture of the United Kingdom that has pushed Adah to such actions.

Further in the novel when the protagonist has finally reached the United Kingdom, Buchi Emecheta reflects upon the tiresome search for accommodation in London due to acute racism. The protagonist Adah Obi and her husband Francis have been turned down by a white landlady. Adah equates their hardships to that of Mary's in searching for a place for giving birth to Jesus. Also, Adah questions the worshipping of Jesus (an Arab) by the white people but rejecting the black tenants. Emecheta interlinks Adah's tough time with Jesus' in the following excerpts:

They walked away in silence. Adah could not bear it. She had either to start screaming or talking, anything that came into her head. She started telling Francis the story of Jesus. She went on and on, how they were turned out of all the decent houses and how Mary had the baby in the manger. . . 'But Jesus was an Arab, was he not? So, to the English, Jesus is coloured. All the pictures show him with the type of pale colour you have. So can't you see these people worship a coloured man and yet refuse to take a coloured family into their home?' ([13], p. 79)

Praying to God is one of the ways to assure oneself and to believe that one will pass through bad times. Adah does the same because she believes in God (Jesus) that only God can save her from all her worries. Adah is found praying in the station when the railway men had called for a strike to make her husband understand the situation that it is the strike and not her tiredness that stopped her from going to her work place. Adah prays sincerely to God (Jesus) and cooks up a story with the railway-men's strike for more pay to Francis when she reaches home. She finds peace in her present suffering as she believes in good times that comes after a bad one. She firmly believes in Jesus and His preaching. She affirms:

(. . .) had not Jesus said that those who suffer here on earth would inherit the Kingdom of Heaven? She would like to go there sometime, with her children. ([13], p. 101)

Religion is an important aspect in the lives of Igbo people. The importance of traditional religion as well as that of Christianity on the Igbo lives is highlighted by Emmanuel Oknonkwo in the following excerpts:

The Igbo are a religious people. Their religion was built upon a community based philosophy of life and served as a proper reply to the puzzles of the individual's being and daily experiences. To be without religion amounts to a self-banning from the entire society. Religion instilled, influenced and affected their daily life activities. ([14], p. 8)

Adah's adherence to Christian values and preaching shows that she firmly believe in God (Jesus) and her life is affected by this religiosity in her work life, married life as well as her spiritual life.

The importance of the Holy book of the Christians, the Bible, in day to day life of a Christian is portrayed by the author in this novel. Through the mouthpiece of Adah, Emecheta affirms that the Bible is one of the greatest books which have all the answers. One can always look up to the book for spiritual guidance and realizations. According to the author, reading the Bible provides the answers of all the worries in life and would lead ignorant people to the path of righteousness. She states:

(. . .) the greatest book on human psychology is the Bible (. . .) It is a mysterious book, one of the greatest of all books, if not the greatest. Hasn't it got all the answers? ([13], p. 103)

Another incident in the novel shows the secondary position of woman compared to man as recorded in the Bible. The story on the origin of woman from the rib of a man bewilders Adah. The author views the whole discussion on creating woman from a man's rib from the feminist perspective. The fact that woman is made out of one rib drawn out from man's body put Adah into wonders and disbelief. The protagonist finds it unfair on part of womankind to bear all the pain in carrying the babies inside their ribs and still continue to work:

Adah peered again at the drawing of the ribs and concluded that they must be those of a woman. The ribs were too fine, too regular to be a man's. Fancy a woman having to work, having to carry babies who kept pushing their mummies about and, on top of it all, having to have cancer as well. Was Eve the only person who ate the apple? Did not the man Adam eat some too? Why was it that women had to bear most of the punishments? It was not at all fair. ([13], p. 105)

Christmas is an important religious occasion of the Christians celebrated every year in the month of December. It marks the birth of Jesus in a manger. Christmas is celebrated by everyone rich or poor all over the world. In London Christmas means prayers, gifts, buying new clothes, supper with near and dear ones. But for migrant people like Adah and her husband, Christmas is celebrated without much grandeur and expenses. Emecheta cynically presents the character of Francis as an irresponsible husband who does not even care to buy gifts for his children. Adah receives gifts from her former boss for Christmas days before the actual Christmas day. It is Adah's motherhood that makes her think about her children first and about their gifts. She believes that it is God (Jesus) who had listened to her prayers. Emecheta writes:

God did understand and comforted her a little. Because, all of a sudden, a big parcel arrived as if it were from Santa Claus. It was from the kind woman who was her boss at the North Finchley Library. There was a doll with eyes that blinked, dressed in white lace with white shoes and socks to match, for Titi. There was a little guitar for Vicky and a hopping, squeaking hedgehog for Bubu. They were so lovely that Adah could hardly wait for Christmas Day to give them her children. ([13], p. 138)

Adah enjoys the spirit of Christmas that comes along with its carol and quite atmosphere in December. Adah contrasts the different ways of celebrating Christmas in England and in Nigeria:

Christmas morning was like any other morning, except that there was so much silence in the street. Snow had fallen in the night and there were no footmarks at all to smear the carpet of white. It was so silent, so peaceful, that Adah understood now why the carol Silent Night belongs to that time of the year. In England it was silent night, holy night. In Nigeria it was noisy night, holy may be, but fireworks night, the night of loud rejoicing, the night of palm-wine drinking in the streets, the night of bell-ringing. In England it was a hush hush morning for was Jesus not lying asleep in the manger? ([13], p. 141)

Emecheta reflects upon the socio-cultural milieu of England and Nigeria during the time of Christmas celebration. In England, it was celebrated peacefully with carols while, in Nigeria it was celebrated quite loud and grand blending their African way of praying and singing in the church and celebrating the religious event. The novel also depicts the prevailing condition of England during Christmas and the difficulty in getting a doctor when Adah's son is bitten by a bed bug on his right ear due to which his ear became larger. Francis insists that he should call the doctor to see Vicky to which Adah replies:

'But it is Christmas', Adah persisted. 'At home in Nigeria you can't get a doctor out on Christmas Day, unless you are a millionaire or something'. ([13], p. 142)

The statements reflect upon the helplessness of middle-class families in London who cannot get a doctor on the Christmas day. Adah feels that Francis' attempt will be wasted as everyone including the doctors were busy celebrating Christmas at home. The prevailing condition of the sick child and the unavailability of a doctor make Adah a more worried mother.

'Church' occupies an important place when it comes to worshipping of Jesus. Emecheta presents sheer differences in the construction of churches in Nigeria and England as well as the environment of the churches. Having to work in the library and managing with her children, Adah finds no time for visiting the church. Emecheta depicts the contrasting churches and their environments in the following paragraphs:

There was no time to go to Church and pray. Not in England. It took her years to erase the image of the Nigerian church which usually had a festive air. In England, especially in London, 'church' was a big grey building with stained-glass windows, high ornamental ceilings, very cold, full of rows and rows of empty chairs, with the voice of the vicar droning from the distant pulpit, crying like the voice of John the Baptist lost in wilderness. In London, churches were cheerless." ([13], p.158)

She could not then go to any of them because it made her cry to see such beautiful places of worship empty when in Nigeria, you could hardly get a seat if you came in late. You had to stand outside and follow the service through a loudspeaker. But you were happy through it all, you were encouraged to bellow out the songs that bellowing took away some of your sorrows. Because most of the hymns seem to be written by psychologists. One was always sure of singing or hearing something that would come near to the problem you had in mind before coming to church. In England you were robbed of such comfort. ([13], p. 159)

The author narrates the benefits of going to a church in these paragraphs. The protagonist says that when one enters the church in Nigeria, one is compelled to sing and release their sorrows and worries while praying to Jesus. And it is this reason that most of the people in Nigeria visit the church to lighten up their pent-up feelings or emotions. However, in the case of churches in London, the building is quite huge and remains empty most of the time. Also the protagonist does not enjoy much going to church in London because there she cannot sing or cry out her worries. Praying in silence does not make her feel any better.

In another novel, *The Bride Price* (1976), Buchi Emecheta brings forth some important issues related with the socio-cultural changes brought by Christianity in Nigeria in the 1950s. The novel witnesses the clash of tradition and modernity in the lives of Igbo people. The story charts the growth of a young Igbo girl named Aku-nna whose father dies early. The death of their father Ezekiel Odia is mourned first by the two children in the traditional Igbo style expecting more tears and cries from the daughter than the son. Having embraced the religion of Christianity by Ezekiel and his family, Ezekiel is given a decent Christian burial after the traditional Igbo death ceremony. At the same time, the author highlights the role played by African women which is considered to be of less importance compared to their male counterparts. This notion is shared by the author through the death of Ezekiel in the following assertions:

It has always been like that in Nigeria. When you have lost your father, you have lost everything. Your mother is only a woman; she cannot do anything for you. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without a home. ([15], p. 12)

It can be asserted that religious ways and ceremonies determine a particular culture and its identity. It is part and parcel of every community to have unique religious ways. In such communities, religious ceremonies are performed keeping the cultural values and morals intact. According to J.S. Mbiti, it is "in the religious way of life, people discover who they are and where they come from." ([16], p. 13). Even in the burial ceremony, Ezekiel is mourned in two different religious ways, one in

traditional Igbo religion and another in Christian religion, to mark the importance he has had in his lifetime and also to identify him with the two embraced religions:

Akinwunmi Street in Lagos had never seen such a long line of mourners on their way to the graveyard. The factory had sent their own special funeral car, with NIGERIAN ENGINE FACTORY painted on the side in gold. Ezekiel's friend from work laid him in the car. Nna-nndo and his sister followed the car, and after them came the singers from the Christian church. Hundreds of friends and neighbours followed, together with anyone else who felt like joining the group. Last of all came the mourners with their death songs and dances, their hand-clapping and their stone-filled gourds. ([15], p. 18)

The news of the death of her husband causes much shock to Ma Blackie who went to Ibuza for praying to the river Goddess for a son. Despite the need for a wife to mourn the death of a husband, the Igbo women of Lagos pressure Ma Blackie to continue her prayers because of the much importance given to sons in the traditional world of Igbo society. Later, Ma Blackie is inherited by her dead husband's brother Okonkwo in Ibuza as per the African tradition of wife inheritance practice after completing nine months in the mourning hut built for her mourning the death of her husband. During the mourning period, she is robbed off all the basic needs and hygiene. Instead she is encouraged by the patriarchal society to wear dark clothes, to keep her hair uncombed and not allowed to meet with anybody. African patriarchy practices its power on African women through the strict religious norms and traditions from which widows like Ma Blackie cannot escape. The notion of religious oppression in African society is put up by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in the following words:

The position of women in Africa today- both within the wider society and within religion is normally prescribed by what is deemed to be beneficial to the welfare of the whole community of women and man. Unfortunately, most of the prescribing tends to be carried out by male authorities, and the resulting role of women tends to be circumscribed by an unchanging set of norms enshrined in a culture that appears to be equally unchanging. ([17], p. 10)

Having lived in a modern place in Lagos earlier, both Aku-nna and Nna-ndo are introduced with modern education. However, due to financial constraint, Nna-ndo gets the support for further education till he reaches the age of fifteen while Aku-nna's fate is secured with education only up to high school level. On the other hand, the establishment of schools by missionaries is perceived in a different way by the Igbo people. Okonkwo's sons Illoba and Osenekwu dislike the idea of going to school like their step-brother and step-sister:

'School,' they said, 'is no use to a free man. School is a place to send your slaves.'

That was another tradition. In the old days, when the white men first started their Christian schools, the local free men had no use for them. They sent their slaves to school to please the white men, while their own free-born sons stayed at home and followed the old traditions. ([15], p. 28)

It can be noted in the novel that the Christian schools established by the white men are not embraced by the so called 'free-born' people of the Igbo society. Instead, the outcastes and the slaves attend the school as the new religion and the school provides them recognitions and opportunities for jobs. And it is due to this reason that Chike Ofulue, a descendant of slaves- the Osu, in the novel is portrayed by the author as an educated teacher who teaches in the white men's school where Aku-nna and Nna-ndo studies. It can also be interpreted that tradition bound people like Okonkwo and his sons are traditional patriarchs who are not ready to accept any foreign rules or education. Rather, they assume the white men's school as a threat to their ancestral glory and tradition.

Christianity plays a major role in the novel in the sense that the gradual acceptance of the new religion in the traditional lives of the Igbo people can be seen. The followers blend the traditional as well as Christian ceremonies and celebrate the important event of Christmas. The author highlights the festive air and its significance to the young Igbo girls:

Christmas was an important time for everyone. The schools were closed and the teachers were on holiday. People who were working away from home came to celebrate Christmas with their families. Every Christmas, the fifteen-year-old girls did a special dance. The girls knew that for most of them it would be their last Christmas in their father's homes. So several times a week they practiced the *aja* dance. ([15], p. 53)

The novel reveals another important aspect of Christianity in the lives of a young Igbo girl and a descendant of slaves. The author displays the traditional African marriage customs according to which a marriage between a free-born Igbo girl and an Osu is strictly prohibited. Also, the 'bride price' holds a great importance in the traditional African marriage. It is a price paid in exchange of the bride's fertility to the bride's family in the form of money, properties or animals etc. If the bridegroom's family fails to give the bride price to the bride's family, the traditional myth of the death of the bride becomes inescapable. As the novel progresses, Aku-nna and Chike fall in love and elope to the neighboring village, the urban Ughelli. Nobody turns up to help out the two except the new religion, Christianity and its followers.

The introduction of Christianity into the native people's culture succeeded in changing the religious mindsets and outlooks of the majority of the native people. The Sunday prayers in nearby churches are one of the effective ways of attracting more believers of Christianity and that happened to be the outcasts and unaccepted tribal natives. The biblical preaching of equality of men gave rays of hope to those outcasts and segregated groups. And this led to the disintegration of the native God worshippers. One can observe the influence of Christianity when Ezekiel married Ma Blackie in a church after following the traditional marriage rituals. In his death too, Ezekiel is given a Christian burial with Christian songs and music. Also, when Chike buys a new bed for starting a newly married life with Aku-nna in Ughelli, his friend Ben Adegor christens the bed and named it 'Joy' with a little whisky on it. So, Christianity serves as a savior to helpless people of Igbo society in the novel. But the author holds strongly in support of tradition against modernity and let her protagonist Aku-nna die in childbirth. Emecheta explains the intention behind Aku-nna's death in a 1980 interview at the University of Calabar:

Aku-nna had to die because at sixteen she chose someone other than the one her family wanted her to marry. Instead of accepting the husband chosen for her by her family she chose someone who had a history in the family of slavery. So she died because she went against her people by marrying the person she chose. ([18], p. 24)

Emecheta portrays Christianity as a rich religion in her another novel *The Slave-Girl* (1977) in which she highlights the African slavery system existed in the 1900s and the changes brought by Christianity on the lives of the slaves and servants. During the period, Christianity was a new wave among the native Igbo people in Onitsa. Various activities are recorded in the novel which was associated with the new religion such as Sunday school, prayers, songs, church harvest festivals etc. Of all the religious activities, the church harvest festival is celebrated with great importance. The slaves especially the girls sew new clothes out of the materials bought by their masters. With the newly stitched clothes, the slaves attend the Sunday school also known as 'Akukwo-Uka' in Igbo. The excitement of wearing new clothes and attending the Sunday school in church by the slaves is depicted poignantly in the novel. Emecheta describes the festive air in the following lines:

The girls were busier than ever as the first church harvest approached. Many of the successful people who had made a great deal of money from selling palm kernels instead of slaves were converted to some form of Christianity, which meant that they all wanted to wear some new

outfit for the harvest festival. The girls were encouraged to work even harder by the expectation that they too would have something new to wear, for they knew that ma Palagada liked to plan little surprises even for her lowliest servant. ([19], p. 105-106)

The new religion in Onitsha has attracted many followers mostly the rich people. They get converted from being a pagan to a Christian because of the new and rich lifestyle of those following Christianity. Ma Palagada's dialogue conveys the message of the well beings of the Christians:

When there was only about an hour to go, and the church bells were pealing their bell songs, Ma in her velvet costume came to where the girls were busy admiring themselves and told them to tie the legs of the hens and cocks, arrange the yams and plantains, put a rope round the goats, and then go round the neighbourhood singing 'kai sua ani. . .'- we plough the field and scatter. . .'

'So that pagans will know how blessed we are,' she said. She thought to herself that this might even convert some to their brand of Christianity. ([19], p. 109)

One can also observe the marginalization of the servants and slaves which is evident from their seats confined to the back row in the church. Emecheta narrates the limited space of these people while worshipping God in the church:

By the time Ojebeta and her fellow slaves and servants had taken their places at the back of the church, they were already tired. She did not much listen to the sermons and the readings but sang joyfully to all the new church tunes she had learned from the white woman at Sunday school. They had been provided with some Igbo hymn books, they did not need them for they knew all the words by heart. ([19], p. 111)

Singing in the church with their Igbo hymn books is one of the religious performances that make the Igbo people (especially the slave and the lower caste people) happy and fulfilled. Singing of hymns is one of the ways that make their souls joyous and peaceful. Since Christianity came into existence in Nigeria as a western import, many of its followers who are illiterate make use of the Igbo version of hymn books and Igbo translated Bible embracing the new religion in their own context.

Buchi Emecheta's magnum opus *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) captures the ambiguous rewards of motherhood through the character of Nnu Ego. The novel is set in pre-colonial times as well as in post-colonial period of Nigeria. The beliefs in traditional religion and its practices are discussed by the author in detail. As per the traditional religious belief, motherhood is central in the lives of married African women. Mercy Amba Oduyoye stresses the role of traditional religion in upholding the importance of motherhood in African society:

Most African religious traditions have placed procreation at the center of the woman's universe; multitudes of taboos and rituals have evolved to direct her life and to keep her safe for procreation . . . Women's lives are regulated by their biology, as if their sole reason for being is to ensure that human life is reproduced and nurtured. ([17], p. 17)

Motherhood defines the real purpose of a woman in her life. In almost every patriarchal society, a married woman without children especially sons is culturally and socially tabooed and rejected by the whole community. To be a barren woman in the African society is considered to be a failed woman. The concept of a barren woman is highlighted by Emecheta in this novel when the protagonist Nnu Ego is unable to bear a child in her first marriage. Nnu Ego's barrenness is reasoned as the dead slave woman's curse. The slave woman was forced to be buried with Agbadi's first wife dead body. The dead slave woman seeks revenge by becoming the *chi* (personal spirit in African context) of Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego opts for the traditional religious methods of pleasing the *chi* by contacting a *dibia*, a traditional medicine man:

After a while, Nnu Ego could not voice her doubts and worries to her husband any more. It had become her problem and hers alone. She went from one *dibia* to another in secret, and was told the same thing—that the slave woman who was her *chi* would not give her a child because she had been dedicated to a river goddess before Agbadi took her away in slavery. When at home, Nnu Ego would take an egg, symbol of fertility, and kneel and pray to this woman to change her mind. "Please pity me. I feel that my husband's people are already looking for a new wife for him. They cannot wait for me forever." ([20], p. 31-32)

Praying and making sacrifices are one of the traditional religious ways to please the *chi* or the dead spirits in Igbo society. It is also made to appear realistic by the author in the novel so much so that Nnu Ego becomes fertile in her second marriage to Nnaife and gives birth to not just one child but as many children as seven surviving children comprising of three sons and four daughters.

Christianity occupies a small portion of the novel in the sense that the whole novel is narrated by the author by accounting largely on the traditional religion and its practices in the lives of Igbo men and women. Nevertheless, one can construe from Nnaife's speech the importance of the new religion in the lives of Igbo men employed by the white people. Marriage in Church becomes mandatory to keep their job alive. Nnaife warns Nnu Ego to keep her pregnancy news quiet:

"Well, if you are pregnant- and believe me, I hope to God you are- there is still one problem. What will they say in the church? We have not been married there. If I do not marry you in church they will remove our names from the church register and Madam here will not like it. I may even lose my job. So keep it quiet, will you? Ubani the cook had to marry his wife in the Catholic Church to save his job." ([20], p. 50)

Poor Nnu Ego shares her husband's remarks with Cordelia, Ubani's wife. But Cordelia points it out to Nnu Ego that their husbands are helpless and their manhood is lost as they earn their living by working under the white people. She explains:

Men here are too busy being white men's servants to be men. We women mind the home. Not our husbands. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is money, shining white man's money . . . They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us. ([20], p. 51)

Due to his job as a washerman to the white couple Mr. and Mrs. Meers, Nnaife practices Christianity and its services. Every Sunday he visits the Lagos island where his community had their own Christian prayers and services. Hailing from a traditional village and upbringing, Nnu Ego cannot understand the new religion as such and follows her husband and obeys his directions. But Nnu Ego complains to Nnaife that the Sunday services have become "monotonous" ([20], p. 48) to her and she has no desire to attend further. It is interesting to note the change of attitude and thinking on the part of Nnaife and Nnu Ego that Nnaife denounces Christianity when the Meers had left the place leaving him jobless and Nnu Ego accepting Christianity as the new religion and change in her life. Nnu Ego consoles herself when Nnaife becomes jobless:

After five years of living with him, she was used to him; listening in the dark to his snores, she coiled inside with shame, remembering some of the evil things she had once thought of Nnaife. Her new Christian religion taught her to bear her cross with fortitude. If hers was to support her family, she would do so, until her husband found a new job. ([20], p. 89)

Emecheta reflects a comparison with the two religions in the novel in the sense that traditional religion encourages and validates polygamy by Igbo men whereas Christianity preaches monogamy. After losing his job, Nnaife who has been a namesake Christian enters polygamy by inheriting his dead brother's wives and children. Polygamy is widely practiced in the Igbo society with a traditional man marrying many wives. The wife inheritance custom also makes polygamy a valid cultural practice among the Igbos. The first wife generally gets the highest respect and name

of being a “senior wife”. Nnu Ego, the first wife of Nnaife, still hopes for a better living with her children and husband. Being a follower of Christianity, Nnu Ego learns to have faith in God (Jesus) at the time of worries and struggles. The Christian belief that Jesus was coming soon serves as a “protective mechanism devised to save them from realities too painful to accept.” ([20], p. 162)

Emecheta also highlights the importance of education in the lives of young African boys and girls. This is shown in the novel by the biased choice of educating Nnu Ego’s children especially the daughters. The boys are favored and sent for education in costly schools whereas the girls are sent for private lessons and encouraged to learn certain trade and house duties. Emecheta writes how young daughters are productively used by their mothers:

The girls were encouraged to continue with their petty trading even though they were at school. They still hawked oranges after school because as their mother Nnu Ego kept saying, “A girl needs to master a trade to help her in later life.” The boys, on the other hand, were encouraged to put more time into their schoolwork. ([20], p. 180)

According to Nnu Ego, educating the sons will help them live a secured life as it is the duty of a son to look after his parents and family in old age. With these thoughts, Nnu Ego and Nnaife manage to send their sons Oshia and Adim to white people’s school while the daughters are taught to learn any kind of trade that will help them in future lives. It can be inferred from the biased treatment of daughters in education that the establishment of schools by the white people in Nigeria is benefited by the sons. The same opportunity is not extended fully to the daughters because the African society is a male (son) preferred society. The position of Igbo daughters and young girls are secondary and diminishes with the arrival of white people and its religion as the white people teach the native men the politics of ruling the oppressed. The white people rule on the native men while the native men in turn rule on their women and children furthering the legacy of colonialism in Igbo society.

3. Conclusions

Buchi Emecheta reveals that the motive behind the adoption of Christianity by the protagonist in the novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) is for her own spiritual guidance in a foreign country. Adah visits the church in London and lightens up her worries in the form of self-talk and prayers. From the feminist perspective, Emecheta through the mouthpiece of Adah questions the biblical story of origin of woman from a man’s rib. The author also projects the painful experience of motherhood when no doctors agree to turn up for her sick child at the time of Christmas. In the second novel *The Bride Price* (1976), Emecheta portrays the different gender roles prescribed by the traditional culture and religion of Igbo society. Igbo men hold supreme power and are central to the Igbo society while the women play subordinate roles prescribed by the men. The practices and beliefs of indigenous religion of Igbo society determine its identity such as ‘mourning period’, animal sacrifices to please the spirits, paying ‘bride price’ at the time of marriage by the bridegroom’s family etc. The novel reflects the strict religious customs practiced by the Igbo women to pray for more children. Women like Ma Blackie in the novel and Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) suffer from acute social and cultural pressures. The novel depicts the embracing of Christianity for western education and social status by the outcaste people while the native men reject the new religion calling it foreign and the school- a place for the slaves. The author display a message of the bad consequences of rejecting one’s own religion and customs through the death of the protagonist Aku-nna in her first childbirth caused by her unpaid bride price. The inescapable myth of death of bride due to unpaid bride price reflects the severity of its religion and customs. The position of women in this context becomes not only marginalized but is also at the crucial point of losing lives caused by the unwavering beliefs of its religion. Set with the background of slavery in Onitsha, Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Slave Girl* (1977) depicts the various Christian religious events such as church harvest

festival in which both the slave men and women enjoy the festive air with new clothes and possible arrangements. The rich masters get to embrace the new religion with much pomp. They the slaves are allowed to enter the church their seats are allocated at the back row of the church highlighting the fact that they belong to the marginalized position of their society especially the slave women. Singing of hymns in Igbo version by the slave women reflects the various ways of embracing the new religion in their Igbo context. The gradual adaptation and adoption of new values and practices are part of religious colonization brought Christianity. Another important aspect of traditional religion is the importance conferred upon motherhood in Igbo society is witnessed in the fourth novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). A barren woman in Igbo society is considered to be a failed woman. The barren women are socially and culturally out casted or estranged. These women will then opt for religious solution by praying to their native Goddess or by making animal sacrifices. The condition of a barren woman is a pitiable one in the sense that her marriage is also at stake for her husband may enter polygamy by marrying another wife. Nnaife keeps his monogamous life intact till he remained in his job as a washer-man to the white couple Mr. and Mrs. Meers following the Christian principle of marriage and registering for marriage in the church. Adoption of Christianity by Nnaife and Nnu Ego make them follow certain religious rules of visiting the church every Sunday which makes Nnu Ego feel boring and monotonous. However, Nnaife enters polygamy once he is left jobless by the Meers after their departure from the land. He inherits his dead brother's wives and children which takes a heavy toll financially on Nnu Ego and her children. Nnu Ego suffers with numerous mouths to feed and other family issues with Nnaife and the other co-wives. Thus, the paper discusses the importance and relevance of indigenous religion as well as Christianity in the lives of native people in the Igbo society as reflected in the novels of Buchi Emecheta. In the four novels the author highlights the various facets of traditional religion and Christianity. Since the Igbo society of Africa being a patriarchal society, the women are marginalized socially and culturally. However, the marginalization also continues within the boundary of traditional religion with the limited roles of women. As compared to the traditional religion followed, the entrance of Christianity in Igbo society widens the scope of African women with modern education and better lifestyle breaking free from the stern religious practices and customs. The findings reveal the positive as well as negative impacts of the new religion on African people and on the position of African women through the characters present in the selected novels. With the medium of writing and through Christianity, Emecheta seek to educate her society and improve upon the position of the African women.

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