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REVIEW ARTICLE

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AFRICAN WOMEN SOCIAL IDENTITY IN AMA DARKO'S THE HOUSEMAID, BUCHI EMECHETA'S THE SLAVE GIRL AND CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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ABSTRACT

In African societies, women are relegated to the second place because of what the patriarchal system imposes on them as their lot. The system encourages and supports men's domination over women. In their respective novels *Things Fall Apart*, *The Slave Girl* and *The Housemaid*, Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta and Ama Darko show how women are ignored and considered as commodities. This research studies chronologically African women's social identity going from the remote era to the contemporary one. The study intends to discover the roles of African women in African society especially after marriage. Firstly, the research reveals the female gender as submissive housewives, and later on, it shows how they acquire financial autonomy. Feminism, post colonialism and structural narratology are applied to deepen the analyses of the happenings in the selected corpus.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that in Africa, women are always assigned tasks related to domestic chores, farm work and they are often said to have their place in the kitchen. Gender roles in a society means how both male and female are expected to act, speak, dress and conduct themselves based upon their assigned sex. Women social identity is related to some social norms and practices based on patriarchy. A patriarchal society is the one in which women are totally deprived of their rights as human beings simply because they are considered as the weaker-sex. It is a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women in several fields of their social life. But gradually after colonization has hit Africa, change has entered in African society and women start getting autonomy vis à vis the male gender. So, in many African communities, colonization has changed women's status from their traditional roles in societies and limits them.....' to passive beneficiaries of support. What is identity? In his book on *The Power of Identity* (1999), Castells defines identity as "The marking, by religion, culture or any other determinant, of any individual or community to allow them to live in society" (6). It is important to mention that a number of researches are carried out on African women social identity. So it is really preoccupant as far as African women social status is concerned. In her article on "The representation of Women and Claims to Citizen's Rights in Africa: Beyond a Political Debate" (2021) the scholar wonders how better can one grasp women's place in African societies, from political hierarchy to grassroots communities. For her, women are at the centre of many social matters such as access to land, resources, and political power.

What is their actual status in the face of many ancient and contemporary persistent patriarchy systems? From another relevant angle, Bergeron rather focuses on "Women's Social Identity as Women New conceptualizations" (2006). The researcher points out women social identity in divers profiles such as collective action; traditionalism, gender discrimination, perceived treatment as a female, men's sexism and stability of gender relations. This research focuses on the actual African women social identity in the patriarchy system in African societies this current fast changing world. It has adopted a qualitative approach and is rather descriptive in order to better scrutinize facts and different events of the plots. Ama Darko's *The Housemaid*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are the selected corpus on which the research is concentrated. An overall look at the novels under study brings to readers' knowledge how the research is carried out chronologically basing on the period of the written stories. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* have gradually disclosed how African patriarchal society is deconstructed with the advent of colonization especially Christianity. Ama Darko's *The Housemaid* rather depicts how women struggle to break the patriarchy system in order to be autonomous in the contemporary world.

Women's Representation in a Patriarchal society: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* are real discoveries of how African women were represented in the patriarchal society. As a matter of fact, women were specially placed in conditions which snatch her total human rights. The scrutiny of the first two novels reveals how gender issue soars up in African society and this practice advocates men's superiority over women. As a matter of fact,

considered as the weaker sex, women are often prevented from doing some things because of her social status.

Female gender's trafficking: Taking into account the patriarchal system in which Africans are embedded, the poor grassroots are always considered to be the unfortunate one and treated untowardly. In Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, the author openly depicts female trafficking and men's superpower over the female gender. In the story, it clearly appears how Okolie in need of money sells his own sister Ojebeta as a mere commodity or an object into slavery to a wealthy woman.

He had never sold anyone before, and now he persuaded himself that what he was about to do was not selling in its actual sense. He was giving his sister away into the keeping of a 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. (Emecheta 31).

For Okolie, it is a normal fact that such a thing happens because Ojebeta is a girl and not a man, and as a man, he has the right to do so: "What does it matter if I have to trade my sister to get it (the money)?" (31). Through Okolie's behaviour, Emecheta sends a vibrant appeal to the world about the female gender enslavement as mere items. In the story, apart from Ojebeta, many other girls like Nwayinuzo, Chiago, Ifeoma and Amanna are all bought by that wealthy woman called Ma Palagada. Once in Ma Palagada's house, the female slaves are made to work hard all along the day. Emecheta's intention is to bring to readers' knowledge how in the Nigerian society all women are enslaved by men.

Attempt at an Arranged Marriage and Sexual Abuse: It is discovered throughout the whole story in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* that when the female slaves grow up, and have the potential to get married, they are given to men of whom they have no acquaintance. The patriarchal system always stipulates that the female gender has no right to interfere in their own marital issue. In fact, the womenfolk are made to accept whatever the male gender decides on their behalf. To back up this preconceived idea about men domination over women, the narrator says: "Of course, no one actually knew what else was expected of Uthe, since her father accepted the bride price before she was able to make any choice. And what obedient daughter of any family, good or bad, would be allowed to marry a man of her choice? She was only obeying her father's instructions" (Emecheta 32-3). Women are simply expected to obey and not to object any decision coming from men especially when it concerns marriage. So, in Ma Palagada's house, things are planned like that and even the slave female girls are aware of that. In their conversation, Ma Palagada plans to marry Ojebeta to Clifford, her only elder son.

I would like you to go and visit your people someday, after you have fully settled with Clifford. They will be so surprised to see you. And, Ojebeta, I want to remember you that we get something as sweet as honey from bees that sting. So, try and forgive your brother. Now you are going to be my son's wife, take care of him. All that would never have come about if your brother Okolie had not sold you to me. But in this household, you will cease to be a slave the day you and my son Clifford marry (Emecheta 137).

It emerges from the quoted passage that female gender should be obedient, for they have no social status allowing them to claim for their rights. The Womenfolk is treated as vile objects in a patriarchal society. Consequently, women simply feel lost. In the case of the slave girls in Emecheta's novel, they imagine if ever their female master Ma Palagada dies. For them, a catastrophic scene will immediately follow if that ever happens. Who do they belong to? That is the central question of Amanna, Ojebeta's best companion: "If anything happens to Man' Amanna said, half to herself and half to Ojebeta, 'I will probably have to go and live with her daughter in Bonny, until I get married to someone [...] and who is going to marry you? Have you

got your eye on someone? [...] 'Have you ever seen a woman who never got a husband? Countered Amanna (Emecheta 113). To place emphasis on the girls' outspokenness, the narrator says this by giving the rightfulness of Amanna's thought.

I did not need reply. Every woman, whether slave or free must marry. All her life a woman always belonged to some male. At birth you were owned by your people, and when you were sold you belonged to a new master, when you grew up your new master who had paid something for you would control you. It was a known fact that although Ma Palagada was the one who had bought them, they immediately belonged to Pa Palagada and whatever he said or ordered would hold. (Emecheta 113).

It clearly emerges from the narrator's words that female genders are doomed to be submissive to the male gender no matter who they are in a patriarchal society. They do not have to care for who will marry them. They will accept whoever is presented to them as their husband because they have slaves' status, and some men should come and pay Ma Palagada their bride price before closing their marriage contract to break a so-called curse upon the girl. Women also suffer sexual harassment or abuse as they have seemingly no right to revolt. It is the case of Pa Palagada who uses to abuse sexually his wife's slave Chiago, something Ma Palagada suspects but dare not to talk about as the customs oblige the womenfolk to be silent before some facts: "She (Ma palagada) knew also that her husband, who she had long suspected to had and eye for the big girl Chiago [...]" (Emecheta 107). Though Ma Palagada herself suspects her husband for such an awful practice, she dares not face him because of her female gender status, and that can also be seen like effrontery vis à vis her husband. Even the other slave girls suspect their friend to be having sexual affairs with their male master, but on the other side, they also learn to keep for themselves what they see in the household. The same thing repeatedly happens to Chiago the big girl. She comes across many difficult and awful situations that she decides to keep for herself, but finally, she confides in Nwayinuzo her friend who carefully listens to her and tries to console her.

'I don't like the idea of going into his room at all when he comes to live here' Chiago was confiding to Nwayinuzo late one night. 'They used to make me do that every morning. [...] 'Oh, you were young then. You don't understand. He fiddles with me. He used to make do things... O my *chi*¹ helps me in this household. Here Chiago broke down crying quietly in her sleeping clothes (Emecheta 90).

Women especially slaves in Emecheta's novel are exposed to sexual abuse of any kind. In fact, Chiago experiences sexual abuse and harassment with both Clifford and Pa Palagada. The girl feels really stunned and physically drained due to the different events she comes across in the household. It is as if the girl is made only to satisfy their libido. Indeed, Chiago is under threat and can on no ground refuse to satisfy Pa Palagada's envy. The latter may have blackmailed her.

'I remember the last time,' Chiago went on. 'I was foolish in those days. I was bending down sweeping the floor when he came up behind me and jumped on me. He pulled at the small breasts I had then... I was not at all developed ... It hurts so, and I screamed. Do you know what he did? He slapped me hard on both sides of my face. I cried and told his mother, and was told to shut up [...] 'that's of recent' agreed Chiago. What she could not bring herself to tell her friend was that she had had to give in completely to the man's gross appetite. That each time their mistress had gone to another village to sell her *abada*² clothe, Pa Palagada would call her to his room on any pretext. Many a time she had come out feeling physically ill and sick at heart; but at least he had promised her freedom, and that he would one day make her his second wife (Emecheta 93).

Even when the girl is disheartened; she feels shocked and expresses her discontent to her mistress, Ma Palagada rejects her words and was firmly told to avoid the issue. In fact, Ma Palagada cannot go to that

¹ One's personal god in Igbo's society

² A kind of traditional fabric

field and face her husband. To crown it all, in a patriarchal system, the male hegemony is visibly set as barrier to women's status. In this regard, female gender is subsequently considered as the inferior gender weaker. Moreover, a woman's properties directly belong to her husband when she dies even if the latter has capable daughters to hold and perpetuate her business. Ma Palagada's case is clearly exposed.

Those concerned in the little drama were not saying anything. Pa Palagada was quiet unapproachable. Even though Ma Palagada's daughters made many claims to her property, it was clear to them that, although they were welcome to some of Ma's trinkets and some of the servants, her lands and her business were the concern of the males in her life (Emecheta 142).

Patriarchal system has no regard for the womenfolk. For men, women are made to listen, obey and do what they are told. The system simply dehumanizes and exposes them to many unfair constraints.

Physical Assault against Women: Both Emecheta and Achebe's novels explore women physical suffering under the male gender's hegemony. Physical assault against women is a very recurring fact in African societies. Regarded as an inferior gender, the women-folk endure much untoward behaviour from the male gender. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is known for his unshakable thought about men's supremacy over the female gender. He advocates men's absolute power and control over women, and that is certainly how his household is led with men's absolute power. The narrator portrays him in such a way: "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived-in perpetual fear of his temper, and so did his little children" (Achebe 8). For Okonkwo, the male gender is superior to women's and must have complete supremacy on them. For that reason, he regrets his daughter to be female and complains all along the story.

But I tell you Obierika, that my children do not resemble me. Where are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies? If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit [...] Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman. At his age I was already fending for myself. No, my friend he is not too young [...] I have done my best to make him into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him (Achebe 46).

Okonkwo wants to bring his son Nwoye up in a special way so that the child becomes a misogynist. African women's low social status is a weakness that some men like Okonkwo use to set fairness in their acts. Ikemefuna's arrival in Okonkwo's compound is an opportunity for Nwoye to grow into a real man as his father wishes. The latter wants to see his elder son thunder about women.

On receiving such a message through a younger brother or sister, Nwoye would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles. Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna. He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. [...] And so, he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. He was like the man in the song who had ten and one wives and not enough soup for his foo-foo (Achebe 37).

So, Okonkwo pleases himself when such things happen. In his household, he perpetually grumbles and thunders, and even severely beats his wives for some tiny mistakes they make. In the story when Ojiugo, Okonkwo's youngest wife goes out from the house to plait her hair without feeding her children, her husband Okonkwo feels as mad and slaps her hard: "Okonkwo knew she (Nwoye's mother) was not speaking the truth. He walked back to his obi to wait Ojiugo's return.

And when she returned, he beat her very heavy" (Achebe 21). Okonkwo's wives regularly receive beating from him because of his nervous condition and his frequent bad temper that the women-folk can do nothing to cool. His second wife get slapped simply because she cuts some banana leaves in which she wrapped some food for the Yam Festival: "'Who killed this banana tree?' he asked. A hush fell on the compound immediately. 'Who killed this tree? Or are you all deaf and dumb? [...] Without argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping'" (Achebe 27). For no concrete facts, Okonkwo gets nervous and thunders about his wives. Okonkwo threatens and traumatize his wives and their daughters. For him, it is a natural fact that the women-folk be treated hard and severely because they are the weaker sex. On the same spot where he beats Ojiugo, he also threatens and nearly kills her because she simply murmurs about his gun, he always uses for hunting but never kills a rat.

But although Okonkwo was a great man whose prowess was universally acknowledged, he was not a hunter. In fact, he had not killed a rat with his gun. And so, when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, his wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately, for her, Okonkwo heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He passed the trigger and there was a loud report accompanied by the wall of his wives and children. He threw down his gun and jumped into the barn, and there lay the woman, very much shaken and frightened but quite unhurt. He heaved a heavy sigh and went away with the gun (Achebe 27-8).

Okonkwo's series of women beating reveals his position about the supremacy of the male gender over the one of female. His position is very clear when he always regrets his daughter Ezinma to be a female. Achebe tackles the burning issue of women beating in *Things Fall Apart*, because of the preconceived idea that the male gender is naturally superior to the female one. Okonkwo's issue is repeated by Nzewulu who pretends to have heard here and there that his wife Mgbafo goes out with another man. Though the woman is pregnant, he beats her. His wife's brother explains: "If, on the other hand, Uzowulu should recover from his madness and come in the proper way to beg his wife to return she will do so on the understanding that if he ever beats her again, we shall cut off his genitals for him" (Achebe 65). The same thing happens in *The Slave Girl* with Chiago who regularly endures sexual harassment from her mistress child Clifford. When she tries to resist the boy's effort she has been violently slapped: "Do you know what he did? He slapped me hard on both sides of my face. I cried and told his mother, and was told to shut up" (Emecheta 65).

Women's Roles as Housewives: As people often say, the women-folk's place is in the kitchen. That is how in the patriarchal systems, women are considered as housemaids and are thought to be naturally created for household chores. Ma Palagada's desire for her son Clifford is pure evidence of what the male gender argues to be purely natural: "You must stay by my son. Men are not as clever as they look. They always need someone, a woman to cook for them. Look after him for me" (Emecheta 139). In fact, women's social function like caregivers once they are married appears as one of the most important tasks they must carry because it is the central nerve that holds a perfect family together and for a better family harmony. Ekwefi, Okonkwo's senior wife fails this crucial duty the aim of which is to cook and feed her children before leaving the house: "Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife who went to plait her hair at her friends' house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal" (Achebe 21). A husband like Okonkwo can never allow such behaviour in his household simply because he is a fierce supporter of men's power over women who are considered as the weak sex. Domestic chores are said to be the women-folk's only job. They are the ones who wake up the first the cock crow and the last who go to bed. All along a day, they carry

out difficult tasks which could result in physical or moral injuries. Emecheta describes women daily tasks.

Akpu was different. Every farmer practiced shifting cultivation [...] The housewife had to go to the farm to dig out cassava roots, carry the tubers for a mile or so, then soak them in the stream in that part of the water specially divided into squares for women to soak their cassava... Then the housewife would put the pulp into a bag and carry it home, heavy and wet and dripping its milky water... some women would even carry two or three of these heavy baskets. After a while, the woman smelled so much of akpu that you could easily tell a habitual akpu carrier from the more privileged women who traded in palm oil, kernels or lighter commodities like ogili matches and cigarettes (Emecheta 156).

Emecheta exposes African women's social condition as housewife with their everyday domestic tasks which is a really demanding job. For the male gender, women are doomed to do such works because it is their lot and they should be content with that. In Okonkwo's household, a team work is put in place among his three wives and their daughters for farm work. They have to wake up early and go to their farm to uproot cassava tubers.

Ekwefi rose early on the following morning and went to her farm with her daughter, Ezinma, and Odiugo's daughter Obiageli, to harvest cassava tubers. Each of them carried a long cane basket, a machete for cutting down the soft cassava stem, and a little hoe for digging out the tuber. Fortunately, a light rain had fallen during the night and the soil would not be very hard (Achebe 116).

In both *Things Fall Apart* and *The Slave Girl*, women are clearly seen to be attached to only domestic and farm works. They are perfectly portrayed as housewives with no other task than the ones they are naturally assigned. In a patriarchal society, things are structured this way and it is what people support as gender division works. Apart from that, women are generally thought to be child bearers due to their natural and social function which is to give birth. The importance of children for African people is prioritized above any other reason in a marriage. After a marriage, if a woman has problems to conceive, the marriage is in somehow doomed to failure. Achebe's novel under scrutiny reveals such a role of the women-folk in marriage. For example, Okonkwo's wife Ekwefi who at all cost wants to give her husband some children, faces hardships and ordeals. She is aware that it is her marital duty to give her husband some children because if she does not, the society will reject and humiliate her as a barren woman, and she could suffer psychologically and morally and even be depressed under social pressure about her woman status. Some barren women are humiliated and insulted by their husband. The following statement justifies a man's anger and how he is disappointed about his wife: "All that comes out of your vagina is nothing but blood" (Phoolofo 381). The character's voice is the one of an upset and desperate man who is tired to see his wife continuing her menstruation period, which subsequently means she is not falling pregnant as expected. Contrarily to that barren woman who suffers insults from her husband, Ekwefi, Okonkwo's wife, faces some spiritual matter with her baby children and that is the reason why she goes through several attempts with expectation that the child will live, unfortunately the child dies: "Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had born ten children and nine of them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three. As she buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to despair and then to grim resignation" (Achebe 54). That is somehow the lot of Ekwefi who should find a way out in a patriarchal system in which the male gender has absolutely no regard for the female gender. The wealthy man Nwakibie's wives are luckier to give him children as the society expects her women to do: "There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but title which a man could take in the clan" (Achebe 13-4). As a matter of fact, it is a pride and joy for women to give their husband some children in order to avoid being stigmatized and be the laughing stock of the society. Achebe's target in pointing out

motherhood's issue is due to the way the male gender looks down the female gender as if women have a spell cast on them. On the other hand, it is obvious and understandable that men take a second wife because in Africa, and precisely in patriarchal society, a childless marriage hardly survives. Things are so because the importance of having children in African society is prioritized above any other reasons for marriage.

In this regard, the narrators' voice backs up Ekwefi's bitterness and disappointment when fails to live motherhood: "The birth of her children, which should be a woman's crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise. The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual" (Achebe 54). It is significant for a woman to deliver and bring up his children like the patriarchal society requires it. Patriarchal system imposes upon the female gender many social duties that constrain them to humility, politeness and full respect towards the male gender

Women financial autonomy: Ama Darko is rather preoccupied by African women status in the contemporary society. In her novel *The Housemaid*, she depicts how some women find freedom to conduct their own life though they live in a patriarchal society. The story opposes village life to city-dwellers. Darko's novel rather seizes the opposite aspect of African women's role and functions in Achebe and Emecheta's novels. In *Things Fall Apart*, no woman has been mentioned to have financial power and autonomy over her husband. Even though in *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta brings to readers' knowledge that Ma Palagada is a wealthy woman, and the novel displays how extended her wealth is, she is perfectly aware that all her wealth one day will be the belongings of Pa palagada because the patriarchal system requires it. On the other hand, in *The Housemaid*, a role reversal is observed. A total mayhem is observed through women acts about trivialities of all kind. In fact, Ama Darko shows how women want to break the social systems imposed upon them by searching for their own economic freedom. In the novel, some women tend to control their husband due to their economic advantage, and that is the reason why a rural exodus about women is observed from Kataso village to Kumassi all along the plot of the novel. Sekyiwa and her only daughter Tika find their ways out and prove really powerful financially. After having a short love affair with a married man, Sekyiwa sees herself overwhelmed by her lover's kindness. The man opens a shop for Sekyiwa who maybe was well prepared for such business, and in a twinkle of eyes, her business thrives and she becomes a wealthy woman with the capacity to take care of their only child Tika.

So, soon after Tika's birth, he got Sekyiwa a big shop and filled it with textile prints. By the third year, Sekyiwa had become one of the wealthy market mummies. Young, good-looking male gold-diggers began to vie for her attention. Her husband's libido was waning anyway, so she gave in. She gave them good money; they gave her good sex. Life's satisfaction shone in her eyes. Her husband mistook it for love; his heart was bursting with satisfaction for his young wife (Darko 18).

Sekyiwa's behaviour shows how things are inverted when comparing the stories in Achebe and Emecheta's novels. She not only uses her financial power to stand as an economically autonomous woman but she also commits adultery by going out with young good-looking male. Indeed, Sekyiwa looks for sexual satisfaction because her husband loses his libido and is sexually unable to play his marital role. In the story, it appears that the male gender is under control of the female gender because of their financial capacity. As a proverb goes in *Things Fall Apart*: "When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth" (Achebe 49). Tika has been watching her mother carefully, and now they are like two drops of water. Sekyiwa finds a way in business for her only daughter after the latter has failed her exam. Her business thrives very fast and becomes as wealthy as her mother. She even proposes to her boyfriend to pay him his bride price as the young student does not have the wherewithal to conclude

their marriage contract: "When will you let your people come to see my people to perform the marriages rites? Tika asked. 'When I find a job and save enough to finance the dowry,' Owuraku replied. 'Why wait that long? I will provide the cash,' Tika offered" (Darko 24). Due to her flourishing international business, Tika does not stay at home like women in *Things Fall Apart* do. She is a contemporary woman with a busy time table: "And Tika revealed that the next two months were going to be busy for her anyway, as she had trips to Togo, Lagos and Abidjan to make" (Darko 56). Tika visibly grows her wealth through business and becomes an autonomous woman who is by her own. With her multiple programs she feels sometimes exhausted, and she is obliged to ask for servant whom she financially supports: "I came to see about a maid. I need one. Someone from my father's family. That is why I am here' [...] she will be living with me. And I am on my own now" (Darko 37). Women's financial power is visible throughout Accra and Kumassi city. Their thriving business and financial autonomy is remarkable throughout the whole country. That is certainly what creates the taxi driver's amazement.

Tika chattered a taxi, and directed the driver to her first debtor. The driver watched her back disappear into the debtor's shop, adjust his seat into the reclining position, then closed his eyes and prayed that his lady passenger would hire him for the whole day. 'Look at me, praying for my luck to shine, so that I can make some money off a woman. These market mummies are taking over the country. They dazzle you with they monkey humility, wheedle all your money out of you, then aim for your power, I bet... (Darko 52)

So Tika and her mother have enough money to stand by themselves and take care of their maids. They easily control men that come their way because only economic freedom can change the preconceived thought the male gender has about women as the weak sex.

CONCLUSION

The three novels under scrutiny explore gender issue in African societies. They depict differently how women are regarded in a well-structured social system such as patriarchy. Firstly, the study shows in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Emechata's *The Slave Girl* that the female gender is humble and submissive no matter what the society imposes upon them as social burdens.

In *The Slave Girl*, young female slaves are trafficked as commodities; they are sexually abused and have no freedom of speech. *Things Fall Apart* rather sheds light on the female gender as caregivers and child bearers. For men, women are made to do with giving birth, taking care of children and working in farms. To crown it all, women are under the heavy weight of the patriarchal system which sees them as mere and vile objects. But Ama Darko's *The Housemaid*, reveals role and power reversal. Women come to know their freedom due to financial power and they consequently become autonomous. The relevance of this study is perceptible through the fact that, though women are looked down the male gender as the weak sex, they are somehow the pillar of the sustainable development of African society.

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