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## An Overview of Buchi Emecheta's Representation of the Nigerian Female

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### **Abstract:**

Using all the novels of Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian females in Nigeria and outside are researched into. The paper tries to recreate the image of these Nigerian women from the novelist's way of representing. Though the Nigerian women have their respective roles to play there have also been the marginalization in many aspects of life. The paper interrogates the system present in the pre-colonial, colonial and neo-colonial eras in which these women have been denied many rights. Emecheta gives tremendous importance to education needed for her Nigerian women so that they can recreate the spaces of confidence, self-help, acquire further productiveness and develop a feminist consciousness. Her female characters struggle against gender biases, racism, inter-ethnic conflicts and certain negative impacts from the institutions of marriage, motherhood and family and try to re-establish themselves. To Emecheta, addressing the ailments of Africans puts the females in positions of power. This paper blends the sociological findings with literary interpretations and critical assessments of Marie Umeh, Lauretta Ngcobo, Nancy Bazin, Florence Stratton, Shivaji Sengupta and others.

**Keywords: Igbo; Nigerian; female; gender; race; motherhood; marriage; family**

Recreating the self by the female characters has been the objective of most female Nigerian writers. The abilities of their women from ancient till contemporary times are drawn by the writers who recreate the new images. Personal observations, experiences and realistic portrayals aim on the contribution of recreation to make the social, personal, religious, cultural and familial activities of the young and the old Nigerian female within and outside the country. Thus, recreating the identity benefits the females of Nigeria who are inevitable part of all ethnic communities. The earliest writers have been males and wrote in English with "Ifo" or oral tradition imbibed in their writings. They created the themes of colonialism, anti-colonialism, decolonization, national liberation, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism in relation with the men. Their women were hardly given space in their writings and even if they ever represented it was "mostly sloppy and biased ... endorsing an institutionalized and one-sided vision of female heroism in African fiction ..." (Fonchingong, 136). Even some of the prominent writers from Nigerian like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper, Bisi Ojdiran, Ben Okri, Eddie Iroh, Ken Saro Wiwa, Akachi Adimora and others have failed to give create ample space for the Nigerian female in their numerous famous works. Llyod Brown pointed out that male writers began writing earlier with the aim of keeping their long histories in autobiographies, memoirs, drama, poetry and fiction but failed to include the females. They under-estimated their women and this difference continued until the upcoming of educated women writers.

In giving full space to the women, the female writers like the male counterparts take the aid of orthography in their English writings and recreate their woman's roles in various aspects of life. One such primary arena is the family which is present from time immemorial and which

is “the most authentic social institution in the post-colonial era. In a continent steeped in artificiality, the African family is more real ...” (Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi, 273). In Nigeria’s Igbo families father/head called “Obi” or the eldest son called “Okpala” (Nwankwo, 4) is the natural inheritor or leader which creates a patriarchal system. But it is also the female who equally helps in creating a family. This family begins with marriage between the man and the woman. Many such families join together “whose members could be multigenerational with biological, non-biological children” (Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi, 159). The marriage begins with Mgba/payment of bride-price by the groom to the bride’s father or family. The children begotten from the marriage are fully inherited by their father’s family only if the Mgba is paid to the mother’s family. The payment also adds to the “afa” or the prestige of the woman, which helps in acquiring cultural rights and religious rights in the husband’s house all throughout life. These aspects and the institution of motherhood have been belittled by the male writers. “The sanctity of motherhood meant that women were treated with respect” (Amadiume, 114) and a “male child is expected mainly because of the patri-lineage” (Oheneba-Sakyi and Takyi, 159) are part of African families. This symbiotic clitoridectomy effaces women via these cultural norms which also include woman in relation to the Mgba custom, willing female singlehood, levirate and polygamy practices. They occur in the daily lives of the African women and are best recorded from the female point of view when their women started writing. When women writers give space to these roles to the fullest they also automatically debunk the patriarchy in the Nigerian families which was earlier lesser known.

That Nigerian women have been regular contributors to fishing, farming, herding and commerce. These contributions have been least covered by the males until the female writers came up. The latter facts of gender-hierarchy created in various professions imposed by colonization has been ignored too which had led to “economic powerlessness” (Nwankwo, 4) of the females. Earlier in the past, she was a constant helper in household chores; in building and repairing houses; and farming and trade. The impact of economic depression added by globalization led separate taxes and trade restrictions levied upon the Nigerian women which later led to the Aba riots. This kind of valuable history was also uninformed in the male writings. Even her political lives in the pre-colonial and later times were hardly compared and represented. Earlier she used to form powerful village gatherings named ‘mikiri’ where rules to run the markets, livestock and crops have been made which applied to all irrespective of gender. There have also been rules to hear complaints from wives against husbands who did not perform the family duties rightly.

The world of their indigenous religion gives wide space to the Igbo and Nigerian female with priestesses, oracles, “Mami Wata” (water spirits or goddesses), and presence of “Chi” guiding the spiritual and social lives too. With the advent of missionaries and colonialism, they embraced Christianity but did not forsake the ancient faiths. Similarly, despite modern education and writing system got introduced yet their oral literature or “Ifo” is imbibed in the contemporary writing ways which preserves the lives of the Igbo world and the bravery of their men but it is the through female singers that Ifo gets recorded. These various important facts about the Nigerian females were given space by the female literary figures. Mabel Segun and Zulu Sofola both Nigerians were some of the earliest female writers who wrote for children and dramas respectively. It cannot be denied that the feminist movement in Europe and England brought women out of Africa. And the foremost female fiction writers Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta made sure that the black women of Africa are represented well. Emecheta

exhaustively contributed to novels, performed plays, illustrated books, autobiographical essays, other essays, juvenile literature, children's literature and broadcast literature. She covers the widest range of Nigerian women and her books create female characters who possess tremendous transformation capabilities and recreate their own life-spaces. This recreation and change away from past's imposed identity is called by Marie Umeh as the "Emechetan poetics." Emecheta gives voice to the voiceless Nigerian women in a very appreciative manner and indulges in the "Igbonization of English" (Igboanusi, 54). Nancy Topping Bazin's "exclusionary practices" reflect upon the themes in Emecheta's novels. Myths play very important role in Emecheta's books like *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price*, *Kehinde* and others. However the myth in *Double Yoke* is different which Ezenwa-Ohaeto examines in "Replacing Myth with Myth: The Feminist Streak in Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* as "myth of (male) masculinity" (Umeh, 158). Other than mythical inserts, the war literature in *Destination Biafra* has an extrovert, female Nigerian soldier-protagonist that proves "potential of women as credible and serious leaders in a new Africa" (Umeh, 331) as stated by Abioseh M. Porter in the essay "They Were There, Too: Women and the Civil War(s) in *Destination Biafra*."

Unlike the Western female authors who over-emphasize sexuality Emecheta and other African females engage beyond sexuality to themes like folk tale, archetypes, proverbs, songs, praise-names and "Ifo" in her narrative which adds an aesthetic element and creates an atmosphere to catch the Igbo flair in her texts. Ifo is the primary domain of women and Susan Arndt in her essay "Buchi Emecheta and the Tradition of Ifo" states that "Buchi Emecheta erected a monument to the oral literature that inspired her to become a writer, by igboizing both her novels and the English language" (Umeh, 50). *Presence africaine*, *African Literatures*, *Transition*, *African Literature Today*, *Postcolonial Text*, *Black Orpheus*, *Ngambika*, *Women in African Literature Today*, *Wasafiri* and *Feminist Africa* have been some of the Journals and books which have been carrying research papers upon Buchi Emecheta's novels. To Florence Stratton, in her *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* "Buchi Emecheta's literary upward mobility has been due largely to the attentions she received from feminist critics" (109).

Emecheta has been born as Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta to Igbo parents on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1944 near Lagos in Nigeria. From childhood onwards she has been determined to get educated like the men and going to London has been part of her childhood dream. She grows up in an extended family learning the art of storytelling from the elderly female kins. At a young age, she marries Nduka Sylvester Onwordi and the couple had five children. By then the marriage starts turning bitter and soon breaks too. It is from this point of life Emecheta begins her writing career, sharing her first-hand experiences and struggles as a Black British, cross-cultural experiences, gender-identity formation, jostling between the ancient religion with Christianity, familial relationships, marriage, motherhood, female childhood, various social themes, impacts of slavery. She presents all these themes through very convincing and poignant female heroines. Laurretta Nbcobo says

Buchi Emecheta knows the hidden feelings of African women and she voices them as perhaps no one has done before. Where the African woman has made a virtue of silent suffering, Emecheta exposes the conspiracy, insisting that female complacency and the unquestioning acceptance of male domination do not constitute the quintessence of femininity (10).

Apart from writing, Emecheta also continues with her studies, acquires various jobs one after another as librarian, youth worker, sociologist, community worker, lecturer and visiting Professor to various universities. She has been having her own publishing house for many years, which has been operating in London and Ibadan. George Braziller, Heinemann, Pacesetter were some of her famous publishers. *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* is considered the first collection of critical essays entirely devoted to a single black African woman writer. She has also been writing some plays, namely – *Juju Landlord* (1975), *A Kind of Marriage* (1975) and *Family Bargain* (1986). She has been awarded with the Jock Campbell Award, Daughter of Mark Twain Award and British Writers Award.

The Igbo and other Nigerian female form the central characters in Emecheta's novels. Young and old they pertain to the ancient times to contemporary Nigeria and England, the latter where they are part of the black British community. These women have been a natural part of their families, economy, trade, politics, culture and literature.

The Early Novels of the 1970s, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1972) are her foremost novels which are later together published as *Adah's Story* (1976). They are based on the role and position of the Igbo female in London amidst the blacks and the whites. These are followed by *The Bride Price* (1976) *The Slave Girl* (1978) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). They have settings of Ibadan and Lagos, where the Igbo female is shown in conflict with certain pre-colonial and post-colonial patriarchal traditions upon which the protagonists ponder to accept or reject. The last early novel is *Titch the Cat* which has a female childhood theme. In the mid-Novels of the 1980s Emecheta moves ahead towards newer themes with Nigerian women other than the Igbo female. They are *The Moonlight Bride* (1980), *The Wrestling Match* (1980), *Destination Biafra* (1981), *Double Yoke* (1982), *The Rape of Shavi* (1983) and *Gwendolen* (1989). *The Moonlight Bride* and *The Wrestling Match* improve the theme of African female childhood of *Titch the Cat* to teenager females or female young adults. They are all put within their familial-socio-cultural contexts. Next in *Double Yoke*, there is the exposure of a sexually exploitative university campus. *The Rape of Shavi* is an allegory with Africa's encounter with the intruder West and it "centralizes rape as the rape of nation" (Umeh, 217). The last mid-novel *Gwendolen* has the theme of incest and its setting is Jamaica and England. The protagonist is raped by a neighbour and her own father too. At the turn of the Millennium and 1990s and beyond Emecheta's *Kehinde* brings back the Igbo female jostling in between England and Nigeria. But unlike the protagonists in the early London novels, Kehinde leaves her husband and chooses a Caribbean partner. *The New Tribe* is her last novel till now and has Nigerian female characters who guide the Nigerian male protagonist in England to resettle his mind which has been disturbed and divided in-between two countries.

### Conclusion:

Buchi Emecheta's novels provide us with a new reading of Nigerian females by making them raise voices against oppressive-expected roles. It can be seen how the novelist recreates a series of Nigerian-British protagonists who are conscious about the ill-treatment given to them for being blacks in England. Despite living in the West, these female blacks have "an increasing need for self-naming, self-defining and self-identity" (*Gwendolen*, 13) who have never fully given up their Africanity. And it "is the means by which people of African descent can assert their own vision of their reality in opposition to that of the dominant culture" (Alexander-Floyd, 70). Emecheta further exposes Nigerian females more explicitly showing them with the capacity

for being soldiers or young students who see traditional marriage as an ‘ancient’ thing and they often try to discard the African identity, considering “now carrying a double yoke of two sets of civilization” (*Double Yoke*, 94). Similarly, inside England the youth there stresses that “Africa is no longer our home. We have stayed away in the market too long, as Nigerians say. Our home is Liverpool!” (*The New Tribe*, 145).

The findings of the research also show that the images that the West have of Africa and vice versa where Emecheta recreates broader and more tolerant views from the mouths of Africans when they say “Are we not all immigrants in Shavi, and even in the face of the earth? We’re all members of the human race” (*The Rape of Shavi*, 39). And in an interview with Jussawala and Dassenbrock Emecheta calls herself “I’m just a citizen of the world” (96-97). Apart from this, Emecheta also has a tremendous capacity to apprehend how the psyches of various ethnic tribes of Nigeria operate. If in *The Rape of Shavi* she shows conflict between whites and blacks after the rape of an African prospective bride by a white intruder; and in *The Bride Price* the Oshus who were once slaves remain unacceptable to the Igbos during marriage in between the two. In *Destination Biafra* the Yorubas and the Hausas are revengeful towards the Igbos and want to get rid of the latter, but again an Igbo chemist can help Yoruba child on the verge of death. Emecheta has this tremendous capacity to see the positive and negative aspects of the Nigerian male and the female. Apart from these Emecheta also creates parallel protagonists or antagonists to resist the violence done against the females and to search and set a new world order for her Nigerian women. For example, in *The Joys of Motherhood* Adaku is shown as a modern woman and antagonist to Nnu Ego who unlike the latter educates her two daughters. Francis in *Second Class Citizen* does not fit in the space of Emecheta’s ideal and caring Nigerian husband and father as Chike and Emmanuel in *The Bride Price* and *Gwendolen* respectively. Another very important finding is how Emecheta recreates the various faces of Nigerian mothers. Nnu Ego achieved motherhood after her first marriage is already broken. When she achieves it from the second marriage, it has been bitter and betraying. Gwendolen experiences it from an incestuous father when she is still too young and unprepared and it is also not known if she will have ungrateful children as Nnu Ego. The true and false company of husbands, fathers, brothers and sons in the spaces of life is also brought to focus. Emecheta’s Aku-nna, Gwendolen and Kehinde get true partners after some struggles. But Adah Obi, Nnu Ego and Debbie are deserted. Despite desertions the writer tries to project them as women of thoughtfulness and changed identity either with a tinge or flooded with feminist consciousness. They transcend the “nervous conditions.” She exposes the oppressive relationships which have often been sanctioned by customs and myths. In “Desire and The Politics of Control in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Family*” in *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* Shivaji Sengupta examines many of Emecheta’s novels and agrees that many of her protagonists are “about poor women who controlled and exploited by race, colonialism and sex” (227). Ultimately however, Emecheta’s both the parallel and the subordinate characters are survivors, want freedom and observed as fighting back to exert their rights.

The findings of the paper show how Emecheta also call for the union of the black women, children and even men. The importance of men cannot be ignored from the lives of her women and she gives ample space to their portrayals. In an interview she says “... in a few of my books like *Double Yoke*, *The Rape of Shavi* and parts of *Destination Biafra* that I used male voices” (Umeh, 452). Although she insists that the women “have been silenced for so long” (Umeh, 452) by men, but the Nigerian males can still create dreams for their females. It is

perhaps from this point of expectation she surprisingly brings a male protagonist in her last novel. Another important tool that can recreate better lives for her Nigerian females is education. For her, education has the best capacity to give women confidence and ability to stand on their own. Family is the most valuable institution for the Africans and all of the books of Emecheta either cover it extensively or there are numerous inevitable inserts. In one of her most often cited essay “Feminism with a small ‘f’” published in *African Literature An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* she reacts to when labeled as feminist that “But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f” (553) where Emecheta’s ‘f’ stands for family. There are numerous other major and minor findings in the novels, which help in the re-creating of Emecheta’s Nigerian protagonists and even other characters. Value dressing, comic elements and use of letters in the movement of the narratives are some of them. The paper is a contribution to knowledge about Igbo and Nigerian women living in Nigeria and England from ancient to contemporary times and in relation to their men, family, place, language, traditions, society, economy and politics.

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