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Redefining Womanhood in the African Context with Reference to the Writings of Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract:

The present study concentrates on the role and activities of African women as they journey through the turbulent phases of womanhood through generations and across time and geographical locations. Understanding the process of womanhood, reveals how patriarchal society has confined womanhood into negative and positive construction of womanhood since ancient times. Deidre L. Badejo examines women as “mythico-religious icons” to delineate the emancipatory potential of African womanhood. In fact, synonymous with the life giving and nurturing role of goddess, women in Africa also played leading roles in social, cultural, economic and religious sphere. These roles specific to the African society to some extent gave women power to redefine their lives. Womanhood inscribed in mythology, exemplified by heroic historical woman figures represent only some characteristics of African womanhood because the advent of Islam, Christianity, and the influence of colonial and neocolonial forces brought unprecedented changes in notion of African womanhood. Features like polygamy, bias in upbringing of boys and girls, frequent and continuous childbearing, slavery, poverty, illiteracy in African society were aspects that continued even after colonial domination. Buchi Emecheta in her work reveals how women break through the inheritance process of womanhood, redefining new roles, functions and life experience, even if it means rejecting the codes of womanhood propagated by patriarchy.

Keywords: Womanhood, Redefinition , Patriarchy, African.

The word, womanhood, refers to the roles and functions a woman performs in general as she grows up from a girl to a woman. Transition to womanhood, in most of the societies, is viewed as the primary determining factor and function of a woman’s life. A woman is valued in the society for her womanhood which involves an amalgamation of social, biological, cultural and ideological factors. Womanhood not only means the process and condition of growing up as a woman but also implies cultural and biological attributes by which a woman is recognized as different from man. It is a stage of complete metamorphosis where societal, familial, and cultural ideologies and values associated with motherhood and wifehood affect the psyche of woman requiring complete submission. The role of woman as a mother, a daughter and a wife are constructed by the patriarchal society to confine woman within these prescribed roles of womanhood. A girl child is under perennial male gaze and at each step of her life; she has to

conform to, what we may call, rigid codes of womanhood dictated by her father, brother, mother and other elderly women. Womanhood, universally, signifies a duty ridden existence, duty to one's husband as a slave, duty towards one's children and in extended families, in traditional societies like India and Africa, it means added responsibility of the family, all in the name of subscribing and living to the ideal image of mother, wife, daughter-in-law. Woman exists only to conform to the patriarchal codes of womanhood, continuously crystallized in her psyche and body in such a way that any deviation is treated as a serious aberration.

Although womanhood is primarily about change – change in woman's biological, psychological, social and religious roles, these roles are defined by patriarchal society. A woman's role is interrelated to internal as well as external changes. African societies give priority to communal values over individual interests yet institutions specific to African culture like indirect rule, bride price, kinship ties, age grades, seniority, sociological and biological ties gave African women some control over their lives. Women had played important role in economic, familial, political and religious spheres. Although their role was not very powerful yet they were effective and influential. Changes like colonization, acceptance of Western values of womanhood in African societies, slow manipulation of sociological and biological ties only in favour of men and patrilineal tradition provided only secondary role to women. Rapid transformations in patterns of authority, economic privilege, clash of new definitions of value, power and property, too, changed their roles.

Though African women lost their previous autonomous roles during colonisation, they have persistently fought oppression of all kinds; that is the reason, they are acknowledged as strong, resilient black women. Most of the institutions that granted women some power to redefine their lives were transformed during the colonial rule. Equitable balance of power ingrained in traditional African society obtained for women more respect, value and recognition of their contribution, but as definition of powerful sphere transformed from traditional spheres of authority, rituals, and age groups to western education, Christian religion and capitalist economy, women could not partake in either of these restructured resources of power directly nor could get support of African men in their pursuit of these widely accepted changes. This brought a retrogressive male absolute power politics in family and social spheres and women's roles, with passage of time, completely came to be identified with the household work and family. External influences thus resulted in continuous transformation in the lives of African women.

African womanhood, during the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial periods, implies rigid and static ideologies and concepts of womanhood which signifies a duty ridden existence for women, relegating them to a marginalized status. For example, a woman who gave birth to male children was respected in African society as a deity while on the other, woman who had only girl child was treated as a barren woman. The preference for male children and the importance placed on the belief that women should give birth to numerous children to uphold the

tradition of a large family were regarded as positive aspects in African society but in reality these aspects became too burdensome for women. Women were deprived of control over their own body; they even lost all power to redefine their existence.

These stagnant and rigid codes of womanhood seem unalterable like some unwritten laws. The emphasis on chastity, bride price, polygamy, giving birth to too many children especially male children and the bias against the girl child are aspects that African women have to live with throughout their lives. A girl child lives only to grow up as a woman and every action of hers as she acts and interacts is under “social” gaze and this process of socialisation instills in her a notion that only by conforming to expected roles and behavior, she can attain womanhood – respectable and acceptable to society. Eva Lennox Birch describes it thus, “Womanhood entails role playing as lover, mother, wife and entertainer. Her life is presented as a series of accommodations to meet the demands of these roles” (142). The various roles in a woman’s life across all social classes and racial backgrounds, primarily, provide limited access to women in terms of privilege equal to men. They are denied equality either on the pretext of biological difference or inferior socio-cultural status. Womanhood is a ‘ritual passage’ for women solidified in myths, rituals, folktales and conservative consciousness about masculine and feminine spheres because of biological difference transmitted from one generation to another generation.

The patriarchal society has constructed two images of womanhood – positive and negative. While the ideology of true or positive womanhood projects that women should be confined to the domestic sphere, be virtuous and submissive under every circumstance, the model of negative womanhood posits woman as licentious, morally corrupt, evil and uncontrolled. The patriarchal ideology of womanhood has constructed static roles for women like that of an obedient daughter or a wife and non-acceptance of these roles makes them vulnerable to punishment. Due to gender bias and lack of economic support, many women become victims of male violence and are abused in both private and public spheres. Elinami Veraeli Swai categorises womanhood as normal or abnormal depending on whether they subscribe to positive or negative image: “Womanhood as an identity different from manhood has come to be seen as imposing on women certain standards that categorise them as normal or abnormal” (152). Both these criteria that determine the status of women as positive or negative are patriarchal constructions to impede the empowerment of women.

To refute the sole representation of womanhood as normal or abnormal, and to acknowledge woman first as an individual before she is a daughter, a mother or a wife, it is necessary to redefine aspects of womanhood. Redefinition of womanhood is necessary because roles, responsibilities, activities and behavior patterns for women vary in different stages of their life. Redefinition encapsulates new roles, functions, activities and life experiences of women redefined by themselves, even if it means rejecting the codes of womanhood propagated by patriarchy. The entire process of becoming a woman is controlled by the dictates of society

resulting in exploitation and marginalized position. Sara Ruddick in her essay “Maternal Thinking” aptly notes, “The ideology of womanhood has been invented by men. It confines us as it exalts us” (587).

Redefinition of womanhood is essential to challenge patriarchal ideology and liberate women from inferior status inscribed in patriarchal society since centuries. In the Western tradition, erosion of women’s status has been ascribed to the pagan traditions and later enforced by eminent philosophers like Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas (originators of Western theology). The doctrine of man’s fall from grace designated woman as an evil and put all kinds of restrictions on her, emphasizing her deformities of mind, body and soul. A survey of historical, mythological and legal doctrines reveal that control and power over the female body conjoined by oppressive rituals and doctrines about the body and role of women always tend to posit the presence of woman in a state of dichotomy – good versus bad, making them subservient and forcing them to aspire only for the role model of being a good woman.

Early Hindu religious texts like the Vedas in India, and African oral traditions and myths are explicit about the twin roles of women and prescribe rules for controlling women so that they can aspire to achieve complete womanhood. These static and rigid ideologies of womanhood have brought forth slow dissociation of women from power in religious, social, and political spheres resulting in concentration of power in men. Rituals, too, stressed the proper role and duty of women as daughters, wives and mothers. In the *Manusmriti*, a female’s role is defined as subservient to men:

In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth, to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent. . . . She who controlling her thoughts, words and deeds, never slights her lord, resides (after death) with her husband (in heaven), and is called a virtuous (wife). (quoted in Wadley 118)

There have also been different models and ideologies of womanhood in different stages of historical development. Western and non-Western cultures operate on a culture-specific discourse of womanhood through ages. New frames are devised to accommodate changing status of women but it culminates in retaining core traditional values intact and most of the emancipatory values are erased. Ideals of womanhood in the Western world in the medieval period through the Renaissance, Victorian and modern, have undergone sea change. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women were primarily confined to home, majority of them were excluded from benefits of education and control over sexuality, propriety, morality were qualities that determined a woman’s status in life. The Victorian ideology construed women as children, as ‘domestic angels’, forever caring, compassionate, loyal and sacrificing. Under the impact of modernisation and feminism, women came to realize how freedom and power to assert

their individuality still did not rest on them alone. Sue Lees commenting on the transformation in meaning of womanhood through different stages/periods, states:

For many years girls were brought up to develop ‘only’ a woman/female identity directed to the reproductive function and caring for a husband, with a subjectivity that was construed as muted or suppressed . . . Today such clear delineation has gone and what comprises womanhood is misty, confused and contradictory. (263)

In the African context, aspects of womanhood like motherhood were highly revered and treated as synonymous with quality of a deity. The goddess image is one of the earliest models of womanhood to be enunciated for women. Goddesses are mostly worshipped in the role of mother and wife and are interpreted in the twin images of creator and destroyer of evil. Motherhood is more revered than any aspect of femaleness because of its association as the primary originator, procreator of earth, sea and sky. In African myths, womanhood is revered in the image of the goddess Ale, Osun and Ogene, women who represent the role of a creator. In Africa, among the Akan, the goddess, Atoapoma and among the Igbos, the river deity, Oboshi represent the aggressive rebelliousness of women. As goddesses, women have the power to make men acknowledge their power both as creator and destroyer of evil. Speaking of the association between goddess and women in West Africa, Tolagbe Ogunleye notes:

The existence of goddess in these civilizations was very important to African women’s self esteem and societal position. . . . Women holding prominent positions within these societies were considered the living manifestation of these goddesses. (198)

Synonymous with the life giving and nurturing role of goddess, women in Africa also played leading roles in social, cultural, economic and religious spheres and were given names like Giver of Life, Queen mother, Rainmaker, Mother Killer. These roles specific to the African society to some extent gave women power to redefine their lives. Deidre L. Badejo in her article, “African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent” examines women as “mythico-religious icons” to delineate the emancipatory potential of African womanhood. The female deity, Osun of patrilineal Yoruba and the Queen mother of matrilineal Akan represent womanhood in terms of power and femininity. Osun is portrayed as “pinnacle of womanhood, as ruler, warrior and wealthy woman” celebrated for her military defense of Osogbo, Osun cannot participate in any behavior that is destructive. “As an African woman, Osun plays many roles that emanate from her central role as woman and mother” (96). Although goddesses were worshipped in the role of creator, mother and destroyer, yet male deities were also esteemed along with female goddess. According to Ogunleye, the reverence for both male and female deities reflected the symmetrical and complementary relationship between African men and women in the communal African society, subsuming the competitive aspect between male and female roles. This positive dimension of womanhood had changed in due course of time.

African writers, critics, feminists have emphasised incorporation of the positive socio-cultural dimensions of African womanhood in women's writing. Femi Ojo-Ade notes the importance of "using culture and history in that positive way, to reaffirm womanhood in the new society of modern, materialistic neocolonialists" (22). He states:

The challenge to women writers is to look at African women at other levels than the established or aspiring middle class; to view the plight of the peasant woman; to present historical heroic female figures queens, conquerors, leaders of nations as role models and as concrete proof of woman's essential presence in the community. (22)

There is no dearth of historical women figures representing dynamic models of African womanhood. Tolagbe Ogunleye in the essay "Women in Ancient West Africa" elaborates how Asante women were considered powerful and dynamic in political and domestic spheres, and felt insulted if compared with qualities of men. Titled women *Ekwe* (queens) of Nnobi society in Igbo land wielded immense power and were regarded as next to goddess Idemili and possessed the right to veto decisions within the nation's formal assemblies. Ogunleye notes that as early as eleventh century, Yoruba men in reverence for the maternal and fertility powers of women that existed in institutions like *Iyale*, paraded through the streets dressed like mature women, carrying figures of babies on their backs to ritualistically worship women's biological function (196-201). In spite of the goddess image attributed to women, both the positive and negative aspects of motherhood are not without failing.

Womanhood inscribed in mythology, exemplified by heroic historical woman figures represent only some characteristics of African womanhood because the advent of Islam, Christianity, and the influence of colonial and neocolonial forces brought unprecedented changes in notion of African womanhood. Although women in traditional society played important roles yet they were subjected to discriminatory rules. Traditional aspects like polygamy, bias in upbringing of boys and girls, frequent and continuous childbearing, slavery, poverty, illiteracy were aspects that continued even after colonial domination. Barren women or women who had lost their child were cruelly treated and thought to be witches, their sterility was interpreted as punishment for their sins. Most of these rules coincided with the process of becoming a woman hence persisted in the form of rituals, customs, mythology and superstition. Men were the leaders in all walks of life and women had to support them and play subordinate roles.

Before African women asserted their own status and position within African society, historical, sociological and anthropological studies had already projected African women as beasts of burden and established a derogatory view of African womanhood. As Africa /Africans were solely defined by the master/slave dialect paradigm between the 15th and 19th centuries in the writings and memoirs of Arab, European explorers, merchants and missionaries who had visited and lived in Africa. African household and women's ways of life were thought to be

modeled in an un-European way. Intrusion of colonial rules in women's lives deteriorated their rights, modeling the role of African women to European standards.

Elizabeth Schmidt, in her study about the position of women in colonial Zimbabwe, reveals the measures taken by colonial government to initiate rules to control African women. She states: "The official view of African women was that they were fickle and irresponsible, ensnaring and deserting men at will" (743). Further, the ideal of Victorian womanhood and family life was impractical in the African context. African family was by and large polygamous family where men were not the sole bread winners, labour of women and children was equally important; sexuality, marriage patterns and collective as well as individual responsibility were different. Under the impact of colonisation, African society and men began to value Western ideology of womanhood and African women had to emulate the roles of being a wife and a mother. Christianity also propagated that African women follow modernized Western ways of life, values and strive to become a chaste and virtuous Englishwoman. Buchi Emecheta, in her novel, *The Slave Girl* illustrates the changing dimensions of African womanhood. While Ma Palagada, became an established and rich cloth trader after her conversion to Christian religion and people felt it a matter of status to have their clothes sewed at the Palagada stalls. "So it was to Ma's stalls that people brought their material to be made into the type of gown that the white woman wore, because there you were properly measured and the girls who sewed could read from books. I am not a pagan, I go to church, and my church 'gam' was made for me at the Palagada stalls in Otu Onitsha" (SG 105). Ojebeta, the protagonist purchased as a slave, in due course of time is valued for her skills and is accepted as a bride for Clifford, Ma Palagada's son. Clifford valued African womanhood that was not traditional and incorporated modern values. Clifford reasons, "In these changing times, an Igbo woman who could sew, cook and serve civilized food, even read and write her name, was going to be an asset to her husband" (SG 117).

Although early writing by African women reflected conceptualisation of African womanhood in her everyday struggle under the influence of social and cultural ideologies, a different perspective related to African womanhood evolved in the aftermath of these studies whereby African women writers strongly articulated the need to redefine African womanhood. African women writers have introduced womanhood as the criteria for evaluating subjugation as well as resistance of African women. Women writers have not only demonstrated the subjugated position of women, they have sought to redefine 'womanhood' as a locus of power and emancipation. African writers like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariamma Ba, through their novels, have rewritten women as "the real material subjects of their collective histories" (Mohanty 62), unveiling the everyday lives of African women and in the process contributed to the development of many concepts of feminism for liberating and empowering them.

A feminist analysis of women writers texts reveals how genital mutilation, enforced silence, lack of choice in matters of education, marriage, motherhood, different standards of

morality and sexuality for men and women and lack of economic freedom deny women opportunity of equality. One major development has been the consistency of African women writers in delineating issues directly confronting patriarchal values. They take a stand against patriarchy and seek to reinstate the power of the African woman through dissident writing, as Chimalum Nwankwo observes “This certainly explains why dissident writing wants to teach something new and something possibly better than the status quo offers” (199). Most novels by African women highlight the burden of African womanhood aptly illustrated in Tsitsi Dangaremba’s novel, *Nervous Condition* where Mainini advises her daughter, Tambu:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden,” she said. “How could it not be? Aren’t we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can’t just decided [sic] today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength. (16)

Apart from representing the burden of womanhood, African women writers emphasize and depict how gender roles are manipulated to subjugate women, diminish their decision making power and how women themselves act as active agents in denying women’s independent choice to opt for an autonomous existence. Flora Nwapa, in *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), deals with the simultaneous burden of marriage, bearing and bringing up of children, quest for personal independence, hypocrisy and shortcomings of traditional society. In *One is Enough* (1981), Amaka, the main character, leaves her husband to fulfill her aspiration of an independent existence. In the end, she redefines womanhood according to her own needs. Asserting her independent status as a single parent, Amaka states:

I don’t want him. I don’t want to be his wife . . . I don’t want to be a wife anymore, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. As a wife I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul . . . I am through with husbands. (*One is Enough* 132)

As a powerful African woman writer, Buchi Emecheta further expands the horizon of black womanhood to elaborate on the themes of subjugation, oppression, gender bias, cultural conflict, colonial and post colonial politics besides the conflict between man-woman relationship. Emecheta’s novels, *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), represent the dilemma of women who are caught between men and tradition in the colonial and the postcolonial Nigeria. Representations of women as mothers, wives and daughters are reviewed in new perspective. These novels show how women are forcibly made to

conform to male laws and traditions like polygamy, belittling of girls and any change in the lives and roles of women is accepted by Igbo patriarchal society only when it is profitable for men. In her representation of African womanhood, Emecheta has depicted oppressive aspects of African culture like bride price, obligatory motherhood, male dominance, polygamy, forced marriage, frequent and unlimited pregnancies and subjugation of women's body as an object to keep her powerless. In *The Bride Price*, the protagonist Aku-nna, "just because she was a woman" (BP 120) equates her existence within traditional Igbo society to the sacrificial hen whose feathers are plucked 'mercilessly' and she has to die. She resists control over her body and mind and shores up her strength to live her life according to her own choice:

A kind of strength came to her, from where she did not know. She knew only that for once in her life, she intended to stand up for herself, to fight for herself, for her honour. This was going to be the deciding moment of her existence. Not her mother, not her relatives, not even Chike, could help her now. (BP 142)

Redefining the tumultuous role of women during the Biafran war, Emecheta creates African woman in a new role. The protagonist, Debbie Ogedembe realizes the hypocrisy of men both Western and Nigerian who wage a war to fulfill their own ambitions and the vulnerable realities of women in such conditions. In spite of experiences of rape, torture, and insult, she remains adamant in the service of her country acknowledging her identity as a woman of Africa. She boldly redefines her status, "I am a woman and a woman of Africa. I am a daughter of Nigeria and if she is in shame, I shall mourn with her in shame" (DB 258). In *Double Yoke* (1982), Ete Kamba who once had rejected Nko for not being a virgin, later begins to accept her assertions for an independent life and realizes Nko's radical thinking. He helplessly feels if he advised her, Nko would tell him "but it makes two to make a woman a prostitute" (DY 160), and shatters Ete Kamba's belief that "A man can raise his own bastard, women are not allowed to do that" (DY 162). Emecheta realistically depicts how women are forcibly dragged to subscribe to preordained roles of women, but their rebellious spirit works against their own mothers and against the sacrosanct sphere of men.

Unwavering in her commitment to explore the inheritance process of womanhood specific to African women's socio-cultural, historical and political experiences, Emecheta presents many aspects of black womanhood. In *The Slave Girl* (1977), Emecheta shows how slave women and men belonging to the lowest strata of society were sent by rich Africans to get education and follow Christianity though it was against African traditions in the early twentieth century. The notion of womanhood in this period reflected the ideology that Western goods were useful but Western morals and manners were unacceptable. But slowly as more African men saw a better future in being educated; they accepted Christianity and demanded Christian educated and westernized wives. Emecheta, in her novels, shows how girls were given Western education to meet these demands. Educated African girls were valued for their western manners and men were ready to pay more bride price for educated girls. But the ironic fact was that even after

getting education, women were not entitled to decision making in family, work outside the home or live a dignified life. Ojebeta, the protagonist of *The Slave Girl*, sums up the predicament of an educated woman as bearing an eternal yoke where her role is “Slave, obey your master. Wife, honour your husband, who is your father, your heart, your soul. So there was little room for Ojebeta to exercise her own individuality . . .” (SG 178).

Buchi Emecheta depicts that successful completion of lifecycle, motherhood, practice of circumcision, gender constructs, image of goddess figures and impact of Christianity/religion formulate an inheritance process for African womanhood which is seized by men, culture and society and implemented to define the role of woman. The inheritance process is established through the repetition of mythology, symbols and rituals of the community and it not only functions as repositories of human beliefs but also directly shapes the destiny of being and becoming a woman in the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial African contexts. She explores how social rules, patriarchy, even senior women enforce rigid codes of womanhood. It is propagated by advice of older women to girls and young women through folk stories and songs and any deviance or waywardness is punished by social ostracism and even with death. Emecheta examines how inheritance process of womanhood subjugates women and girls and curbs their desire for education, proper marriage, career and freedom. Emecheta also unravels how repression of self in becoming a woman could become self destructive. Aspects of womanhood are not determined by women alone, although they can through education and self determination resist negative ideologies of womanhood thrust upon them in the name of complementary relation between men and women.

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