The Other Woman: A study of Buchi Emecheta’s selected Novels

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ABSTRACT

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta the female Nigerian writer settled in England was born to Igbo parents in Yaba, a small village near Lagos, Nigeria on 21 July 1944 managed to get an education at a missionary school bound by the custom she left the school at the age of sixteen to marry a man to whom she had been engaged since eleven years old. She became a mother at seventeen had two sons and three daughters by the time she was twenty-two. She moved to London in 1960, where she worked as a librarian and became a student at London University in 1970. She began to write about the women in Nigeria in ‘The Bride Price’, and ‘The slave Girl’ both the novels are an account of women’s experiences in the face of changing values in traditional Igbo society.

The black women’s literary tradition began in a conscious effort to create a space for black women’s writing to illustrate a distinction between black women’s reality and the reality of others. Identity is an important part of black women’s literature. Race, Class, Gender and ethnicity are all components of one’s identity. All of Buchi Emecheta’s novels take up the question of where the character’s original Home is, what ancestral roots are and how such things shapes black female identity. Her characters in the novels are searching for self completion, a way to feel unified or at least a distinct way of feeling to be a part of larger community/culture.

Key words: Emecheta, Women’s Identity, Nigerian women, Slave Girl, The other woman.

INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta has attracted international attention for her compelling depiction of the female experience in African society and in particular, her native Nigeria. Along with Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, and fellow Nigerian Flora Nwapa, Emecheta is credited with establishing an important female presence in the previously male dominated literature of modern Africa. Critics have praised Emecheta for her straight forward prose and poignant evocation of her heroine’s tribulations.

Buchi Emecheta in her novels portrayed women as a whole and not as individuals. She represents women as African women. Her novels address the complicated nature of feminist practices that are demanded by the positioning of postcolonial/colonial female subjects. Buchi Emecheta speaks of the struggles and conflicts of black women and the gender roles imposed upon them within preexisting hierarchies. She further speaks of women’s struggles to gain independence from their subservient roles as wives and to gain a voice of their own. Buchi Emecheta abandons the autobiographical mode of writing as she forays deeper into the African past attempting to recover the lost female self. Identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ and as well as of ‘being’ and it belongs to the future as much as to the past. Buchi Emecheta does more than simply reproduce culturally and historically muted women, she subverts patriarchal social and literary scripts. She asserts the value of individual black female experience while weaving it into generations of female history.

Women in Colonial Nigeria

The position of women in present day Nigeria is far better than that of colonial and pre colonial period. The position of women in colonial Africa is the same- oppressed by men, society and by the colonizers, but the position of women in pre-colonial period differed among the ethnic groups in Africa. From the post-colonial view women in Africa were triply
colonized, first by the society then by husband later by the colonizers. Women were sold in to slavery in the colonial period. The domestic slaves were sexually harassed, they cannot say ‘no’ to the male masters. In some places women are raped by the colonizers. The slaves were treated cruelly and tend to work hard.

Women in pre-colonial Africa held a complementary position to men. The patriarchal kinship allowed women to take decision of their own in household needs and the position of women varied depending on the kinship structure within the ethnic group and on the economic structure of the society/family. During the time when polygamy was in practice the ‘First’ wife was given some liberation, she can take decision of her own in household things. The African patriarchal kinship structure dominated women in all grounds. Women are considered as a procreative human being. Nigerian tribal societies conceived the position of women as subordinate to men. According to the tribal community law if once a woman gets married to someone then she does not belong to her parents or to her community. Soon after her marriage she becomes her husband’s property and she belongs to his community Emecheta in her novel “The Slave Girl” describes the condition of the married woman in the tribal society as: If a good wife was in trouble of any kind, instead of calling on God to help her she could call out either the name of her husband or of the god of her husband’s people; certainly not the gods in the huts of her own father, for they should cease to exist for her, the day her pride price is paid. From that day she should be loyal to her husband, his gods and his people, in body and in spirit. (3-4)

In looking at the novels of Emecheta it is evident that historicized suffering becomes a trope that unites her sensibilities across culture. The unpleasant memories of slavery surface throughout her novels and confront the facts of black female existence not just during slavery but after as well. Thus, it can be argued that the novels of Buchi Emecheta get much of their emotive power from their ability to convey to the reader the real suffering of slavery through the fictional form. At the same time, Buchi’s narratives convey the equally balanced need for some method of healing of past wounds which have led to present failures. In other words, Emecheta emphasize the resistance to oppression in all its forms, especially the similarity between racist exploitation and experience oppression based not necessarily on racism but on grounds of being ‘other’ to racist/imperialist/patriarchal structures of discourse and power. Buchi Emecheta in her novels shares the anguish of black women. She makes a series of connections between marriage, motherhood, slavery and colonization. The slave motif is used to articulate multiple factors which silence black women. Buchi Emecheta in her novel “The Slave Girl” rings many changes on the idea of slavery, both literal and metaphorical. Her metaphorical uses of it appear in the fact that she uses slavery to represent the position of women. She gives conflicting views of slavery to show how slavery is engendered by the native practices or colonization. In “The Slave Girl” the protagonist ‘Ojebeta’ childhood acts as a disillusioned, almost cynical, contrast to the adulthood. When Ojebeta was small she had peaceful life when her parents were alive but this representation reverberates when Okolie, her brother sells her to a slave master after their parents die. These kind of ambiguities seems to be Emecheta’s method of representing the complex society, one influenced by two contradicting cultures.

“The Bride Price” illustrates the injustice of male chauvinism and caste restrictions in her native country. “The Bride Price” (1976) begins in a somewhat industrialized urban centre, the novel begins with the farewell Ezikel to his children that sets the rest of the events in motion. In their culture, a woman without a husband is unable to take care of herself or her children. It is in the first three chapters of the novel that Emecheta covers the transition from Ezekiel’s death and funeral to the eventual departure of his widow and children from the city. In the course of time Buchi brings up the concept of bride price and their role in the Nigerian society.
“The name of the protagonist, Aku-nna, literally means father's wealth. Her name refers to the bride price that her father will receive upon her marriage” (CLC). Aku-nna, at the age of thirteen, becomes well aware of the meaning of her name as well as her role in her society. This Aku-nna’s role, as it is the role of every woman in her society. She is expected to bring wealth to her husband’s family in the form of male children. Unfortunately Aku-nna’s father, although he tells her that he needs to visit the hospital for a short time, is overcome by an infirmity and dies. Ma Blackie, Aku-nna’s mother, returns to Lagos to discover that her husband has died. She knows that since she is without a husband, she cannot remain in Lagos and therefore prepares her children for their return to Ibuza. It is in Ibuza, Aku-nna meets Chike Ofulue, her future school teacher as well as her future husband. “Chike would have outgrown Aku-nna,” the narrator states, “and maybe she would come to regard there might be between them as mere childish infatuation, if the adults had just left them alone” [2]. But the adults do not leave them alone. They tell their children what they can and cannot do without giving them much explanation. After losing her father to death and her mother in the Ibo culture, Aku-nna feels isolated. Chike, for his part is almost willing to forget about Aku-nna until he witnesses the signs of her first menstruation, he is compelled to protect her. When a young woman experiences her first menstruation, it is the signal that she is available for marriage.

Even after several attempts by Chike’s father, Aku-nna’s step-father refuses to accept a bride price. It is known curse in the Ibo culture that the young wives whose fathers do not accept a bride price, the expectant mother will die during childbirth. Aku-nna, in the end; cannot completely step away from the traditions of her people, she is well aware that only in death she will win her freedom.

CONCLUSION
In the colonized setting of Nigeria of Buchi Emecheta’s the concept of the ‘Other’ becomes even more complex. She learns to vocalize her thoughts, which, in the beginning of the book, are heard only inside her head. It is through a development of her inner voice as she moves from daughter to wife, from city girl to country woman, from prepubescent teen to mother, that the reader gets a sense of how it feels to be the ‘Other’. Emecheta’s stories end on ambiguous notes. In her novels she imposes the role of feminist.

“The Slave Girl” shows how the female slaves were treated in the colonial period and how the male masters sexually harassed them. The male masters sexually abused/ harassed even the small girls. The novel begins with a prologue that gives a synoptic history of the founding of the area where the story takes place. Along with the historical backdrop, the prologue describes the area’s prominent cultural institutions and assumptions. The protagonist story was not her own but she represents her (slave) community. By presenting Ojebeta, Emecheta states the position of women in the male dominated society. She depicts her limited opportunities and makes use of the metaphor of slavery to represent the status of women in Nigeria.

Buchi Emecheta’s women do not simply lie down and die. In this respect, Emecheta’s novels serve as a springboard to explore the situation and achievements of black women both traditional and modern for the rest of the West African region. Emecheta places each woman’s achievements in the context of her life and time in such a manner as to allow for a probing of the fissures in the lives of these women.

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