

# The Legacy of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Women's Fiction

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**Abstract**—Buchi Emecheta is one of Nigeria's early prominent female writers. Her legacy has created a path of inspiration for contemporary Nigerian women writers. This paper intends to analyze her oeuvre, focusing on the varied womanist representations of Nigerian female characters. As such, a detailed qualitative examination of Emecheta's works, particularly *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Kehinde* (1994) and *The Family* (1990) reveal Nigerian female characters who challenge prescribed understandings of their roles as 'woman', 'wife' and 'mother.' Nnu Ego, Kehinde, Nko and Gwendolen are womanist representations of Nigerian female characters who achieve their agency, subjectivity and determination through redefining their responsibilities as 'women', 'wives', and 'mothers'. As such, Emecheta's female characterizations establish a tradition of women, who are strong, self-willed and empowered despite their varied circumstances, a portrayal worthy of emulation.

**Index Terms**—Buchi Emecheta, womanist, female representation, Nigerian women's literature.

## I. INTRODUCTION

While the genesis of African and Nigerian women's literature began with Flora Nwapa, second generation Nigerian Igbo woman writer Buchi Emecheta's works have created a milestone in African literature. Buchi Emecheta's life is as exemplarily as her resilient, strong womanist characters. This paper intends to show the vast array of female characters depicted in Emecheta's writing from the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial time frames, analysing the various changes and challenges experienced by Nigerian Igbo female characters which subsequently change their defined roles as woman, wife and mother. In doing so, we will see how Emecheta's fictional writings reflect the Igbo woman's courage in facing various circumstances.

For the purpose of this paper, we locate our discourse within the framework of womanist theory expounded by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Alice Walker. There are many varying epistemological positions in which Nigerian women's writings may be visibly situated, an accretion of theories such as African feminism, stiwanism (from STIWA: Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), Africana Womanism and so on which ultimately conglomerate towards expressions of various scholars' stances. Particularly confounding to this discussion is the location of African feminist theory within African women's writings. Although African feminist theorists like Carol

Boyce Davies, and Susan Arndt articulate African feminism as a theory that combines feminist concerns with African concerns, the viability of African feminism is challenged by Africana womanist theorist Clenora Hudson-Weems who articulates the impossibility of amalgamating feminism into African concerns as feminism was a theory formed and espoused by white women to address their specific agendas as well as needs [1]. Although debatable, this perspective cannot be overlooked and we find Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Ba being defensive and indignant whenever they are referred to as feminist. In fact, Buchi Emecheta states that her type of feminism is an African type of feminism called womanism. Therefore within the African female struggle for self-articulation, empowerment and womanhood is the greater battle to define evolving ideologies and theories, a process which hopefully will be progressively clarified and elucidated. As such, Ogunyemi and Walker's womanist theory is used in Emecheta's writings to theorise the female characters metamorphosis and development towards agency and personhood. Although Alice Walker's womanist theory draws on the African-American experience, we find her definition of womanist theory useful in providing a wholesome definition of the female quest for womanhood and empowerment. Moreover, it is relevant to use Walker's and Ogunyemi's discourse of womanist theory concurrently as their definitions overlap, implying a general concern for the development and self-definition of the Black female subject, epitomizing the womanist process towards self-actualization and agency.

## II. DISCUSSION

Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta is one of Africa's most acclaimed female writers. Emecheta married Sylvester Onwordi at 16 years of age and as a young mother of two, joined her husband in London while he was pursuing his studies. She eventually left her abusive husband after he burnt the first manuscript of her book in 1966. She struggled to support her five children while working, pursuing a degree in sociology and writing. A writer inspired by her culture and experience, Emecheta's oeuvre is extensive. A brief biography of Emecheta's life is significant in highlighting the source of her writings, of a Nigerian woman's struggle in defending and insisting for her female independence and agency. Emecheta in my opinion uses her own personal experiences as the stepping stone in expressing and confronting female subjugation. While edifying readers about the Nigerian culture, she also exposes the oppressive systems perpetuated by Nigerian culture and myth. Drawing on Nigerian oral tradition she experienced as a child from her

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paternal grandmother<sup>1</sup>, Emecheta weaves narratives of female characters “through an African woman’s eyes”, a modern story-teller through her fiction [2].

Emecheta’s Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), reflects an Igbo womanist who copes with the changes experience by Igbo traditional society with the advent of colonialism. In this novel, Emecheta demonstrates how the traditional point of view of a woman’s role in pre-colonial Nigeria was not applicable during the colonial period. She shows how the Nigerian woman does not benefit from colonial Nigeria and has lost the place and role ascribed to her during its pre-colonial stage. As Nigerian society changed, women were still expected to play their traditional roles as wives, economic providers and nurturers. This change brought about many problems for them. One of the major changes the Nigerian woman faced was in the area of motherhood. As a writer dedicated to exploring the afflictions faced by Nigerian women, Emecheta challenges the conventional notion that bearing many children will bring a woman much joy. She states in an interview with Adeola James that “in *Joys of Motherhood*...I created a woman who had eight children and died by the wayside” [3]. Despite her many children, Nnu Ego still died alone. Here Emecheta tries to convey the message that “having so many children does not mean you are going to be rich in your old age” [4].

Traditionally, readings of Nnu Ego have always highlighted her shortcomings as a female character, unable to make suitable changes for her life as an independent Nigerian woman in colonial Lagos. Florence Stratton in her reading of *Joys of Motherhood* (1979) in *Their New Sister: Buchi Emecheta and the contemporary African literary tradition* states that “Emecheta punishes her conservative heroine [Nnu Ego]” for conforming to the roles of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ defined by Igbo society [5]. Although Emecheta may be critical in her representation of Nnu Ego’s inability to cope with the changes in society, her portrayal of female characters in the novel do not constitute reward or punishment of characters. Instead, her focus is to show the effects of colonialism on the life of Igbo women who devote themselves totally to their family while negating themselves. In this light, it is apt to analyse womanist traits in Nnu Ego character as she does actually display strength and resilience. Despite the difficulties of adjusting to colonial Lagos, Nnu Ego single-handedly raised her eight children, clothing, feeding and “[scraping] and [saving] to pay the...school fees for Oshia and Adim” from her income as a peddler [6]. In fact, her sacrificial nature is also reflected when she could not and would not allow herself to “afford another outfit [*lappa*]” because she put the care of her children first in her life [6]. Constantly reminding herself that her children were her priority, Nnu Ego lived her life as a sacrificial mother “responsible ... [and] serious” in nurturing her children and her husband [7]. Her inability to adjust to the changes in her role as ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ in colonial Lagos does not stop Nnu Ego from being a good ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ to Nnaife and her children, epitomizing a representation of an early womanist character.

Interestingly, Nnu Ego does defy the dictates of Igbo culture in her death, an indication of her refusal to be subjugated, taking stock of her life and the lives of future women. The text states that stories afterwards, however, said that Nnu Ego was a wicked woman even in death because, however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did. Poor Nnu Ego, even in death she had no peace!...the joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children, they said...people failed to understand why she did not answer their prayers, for what else could a woman want but to have sons who would give her a decent burial? Nnu Ego had it all, yet she still did not answer the prayers of her children [6].

In her death, Nnu Ego’s refusal to grant children to her worshipers is the beginning of her self-assertion, an independent decision of a ‘woman’ who has suffered the consequences of having numerous children without having any ‘joys’ for herself. Nnu Ego’s rebellion in death despite being labelled a ‘wicked’ woman shows the shedding of her old traditional Igbo ways. In death, Nnu Ego is not a defeated heroine but like Nwapa’s Efurú reaches an understanding of other possibilities and definitions for women, rather than the fixation of motherhood as a definition to womanhood. The last line of Nwapa’s *Efurú* (1966), where Efurú is said to have “never experienced the joy of motherhood” is linked to the title of Emecheta’s novel [8]. Susan Andrade reads Emecheta’s Nnu Ego as “blatantly [criticizing] her precursor’s privileging of motherhood through *her* last lines” [9]. In my opinion Emecheta echoes Nwapa’s stand in implying at the end of the text that there are other options for women other than motherhood. As Efurú decides to live her life as a worshiper of Uhamiri, Nnu Ego in death, refuses to grant her worshipers children, a clear indication of her refusal to burden her worshipers with children at the expense of themselves. In fact, Emecheta takes this a step further to place Nnu Ego in a position of power as a *chi*, to grant or refuse children to her worshippers. In Nnu Ego, Emecheta creates a new platform of early womanist characters that paved the way for her latter characters like Kehinde, Nko and Gwendolen.

Buchi Emecheta’s *Kehinde* (1994) reflects the complete transformation of the Igbo female character from the confined role as ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ to understanding and perceiving herself as ‘woman’. This transformation towards individual subjectivity is developed through the rejection of patriarchal conventional expectations of women. The development of the ‘self’ is done in two ways in the novel, first through the ‘unborn child’ that helps Kehinde conceive the notion of her identity as a woman outside the definitions of motherhood and secondly through the rejection of polygamy as a way of life where women are more than mere appendages to their husbands. Kehinde Okolo is an independent, modern woman who holds a good job working in a bank in England and contributes a substantial amount of money to the running of her family with Albert, her husband. However, Albert is unable to accept Kehinde’s freedom and is resentful towards her autonomous individuality. He longs to return to Nigeria and participate in the oil boom so that he may once again feel important as an African man in African society unlike in England where “women rule in this country” [10]. He returns to Nigeria and leaves Kehinde in

<sup>1</sup> Emecheta states that she was “determined to be a story teller as a little girl”, craving a path for herself in the art of modern folklore. Murray, Maggie. *Our Own Freedom*. Sheba Feminist Press: London, 1981.

England for two year's while she waits for him to send for her. It is Kehinde's unborn "man-child" that begins her process of recognizing her worth as a woman when she realizes Albert's selfish prioritizing of his ambitions over their lives [10]. Her unquestioning role as a 'wife' and 'mother' is destabilized when she realizes Albert puppeteers her life without a single thought of her well-being despite her contributions to the dynamics of their marriage. Female subjectivity on issues surrounding gender and sexuality is raised as Kehinde is unable to make the decision of keeping her own child, the decision being made for her.

The idea of polygamy is played out when Kehinde returns to Nigeria and finds out Albert has "got another wife" [10]. Kehinde's life changes and she is forced to take on the role as "the senior wife of a successful Nigerian man" [10]. She is stripped of her own personhood and is unable to call Albert by name but has to learn to refer to him as "our husband or Joshua's father" [10]. Kehinde is neither able to discuss matters with Albert nor reconcile herself to the role she is expected to play in Nigerian society. When Albert gives her the "first housekeeping money in over eighteen years", she is expected to kneel to take it. When she refuses to do so, Albert's sisters "levied a fine of one cock" which "took half the housekeeping" money from her [10]. However, true to the womanist solidarity that exists between Nigerian women, Moriammo extends a helping hand by sending Kehinde the fare she requires and reminds her to not let "fear of what people will say stop you from doing what your *chi* wants" [10]. Kehinde decides to leave Nigeria and returns to England. She makes a decision for herself and explains to Ifeyinwa that she had "never lived in a polygamous family before, except when [she] came to visit [her]" and she was not willing "to go through all this again now" [10]. Kehinde's rejection of polygamy and her decision to return to England explains her realization that she deserved to be valued. When Albert and his family refuse to value her, Kehinde claimed it for herself. Kehinde's act is her recognition of seeing herself beyond role as 'wife' but as a 'woman' to be valued. In England, Kehinde's spirit twin Taiwo declares "Home, sweet home!" and advises Kehinde that "we make our own choices as we go along...This is yours. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that" [10]. With the encouragement and support of her *chi*, Kehinde's alternate identity in the spirit world, she confidently throws away the signboard in front of her house declaring, "This house is not for sale...This house is mine" [10]. In recognizing the house belonged to her, Kehinde learns to not only value herself but also value what she worked so hard to own because it was "her position in the bank that they had been able to get a mortgage" [10]. The assertion of the individual 'woman' here is clear. In an interview, Emecheta states that Kehinde signifies how Nigerian women "coped with the changes from one culture to the other and survived...Kehinde came here [London], went back, and then returned after a long stay. It shows the spirit of Black women toward survival" [11]. In their relationships, Kehinde, Taiwo, Ifeyinwa and Moriammo reflect Nigerian women's solidarity towards each other as they have a "healthy love for [themselves], [their] sisters, and [their] community which allows [them] to continue [their] struggle and work" [12]. Kehinde is able to draw strength from

women like Ifenyiwa (her sister), Taiwo (her spirit twin) and Moriammo through their physical, emotional and monetary assistance as well as compassion. Taiwo's wisdom helps Kehinde make astute decisions in her life while Ifenyiwa and Moriammo offer her assistance when she needed it. Emecheta not only reflects how Kehinde is able to make her own decisions but she does this with the help of the women in her life.

Kehinde's full metamorphosis (Ogunyemi) into her identity as a 'woman' occurs in London, when she acquires a university degree. In her letter, Bimpe congratulates her mother's achievements stating: "Congratulations! I can't believe that in such a short time, a little over three years, you could get a degree! I know you said you were determined to be a university graduate" [10]. Emecheta here implies that education is a step to a woman's advancement, self-fulfillment and self-achievement. When Joshua returns to England as a young man, he returns home to a more confident and self-fulfilled mother. When he asks his mother why a certain Mr. Gibson was tenant in their house exclaiming "this is my house, and I want him out", Kehinde immediately corrects him and tells him that "it's not quite like that. This is *my* house, though it may be yours one day" [10]. As Joshua continues to prod Kehinde on her duty as a mother in which she was "supposed to live for [her] children", Kehinde tells him firmly that

I did when you were young. My whole life was wound around your needs, but now you're a grown man! Mothers are people too; you know...I just don't have the energy to be the carrier of everybody's burdens any more [10].

In using the first person 'I', Kehinde recognizes her dignity and her need to be acknowledged as a person and as an individual, not just as a woman confined to roles dictated by her culture. In standing up to her son, Kehinde recognizes her identity as a 'woman' and places value upon her womanhood. When Joshua is unhappy with his mother's stand, Kehinde resigns herself to the knowledge that "claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human" [10]. She tells her Taiwo, "now we are one" [10]. In uniting herself with her *chi*, Kehinde finds the strength to stand up against social conventions, with a pertinent message that "things cannot go on as they used to" [13].

Unlike Emecheta's previous heroine Nnu Ego, who struggled to stand up against societal conventions and pressures, Kehinde rises above these traditions, learns to claim worth for her life and her individual subjectivity as a woman. She is able to say "I have a degree and a job at the Department of Social Services. I'm enjoying meeting people and leading my own life" [10]. Through Kehinde's independent and determined character, Emecheta shows that future prospects for the Nigerian woman are bright. Emecheta opines that Nigerian women like Kehinde reflect "the black woman survivor just like her ancestors survived slavery...these women try to make the best of a bad situation" [14]. Armed with a determined spirit inspired by her female heritage, her knowledge and self-awareness, Kehinde not only speaks of the possibilities of Nigerian women everywhere achieving and claiming a sense of individuality but also their rightful place in society, moving

beyond the limited definitions of their roles as 'wives' and 'mothers'.

Another aspect in which the role of 'woman' is explored more fully is in Emecheta's representation of the young female character. The young female character in Emecheta's *The Family* (1990) matures into an understanding of her personhood as 'woman' through a traumatic experience, rape. Emecheta uses rape as an act of physical violence and as a metaphor to describe these young female characters metamorphosis into womanhood. Emecheta shows how the violent act of rape on her sexuality, although tragic, does not hamper this young character but instead teaches her to grow into a maturity of protecting herself as a woman. Gwendolen is sexually violated twice in the novels, and falls pregnant. Instead of being crippled by her experience, 'the child' she carries instead strengthens her to be a stronger woman and better mother. In this case the representation of the young female characters is inverted, where she develops a sense of her female subjectivity as a 'woman' first before she is a 'mother', implying a better way for a woman to see herself.

In Nigerian society, rape is a taboo subject, not to be discussed or written about. However, this does not mean that rape does not happen in Nigerian society. Rape is defined as sexual intercourse forced upon a female without her consent. Rape also happens "by threat of bodily harm or forced upon the woman when she is helpless" [15]. In *The Family* (1990), rape is a common motif and theme which not only reflects physical usurpation of the female body but also an extreme act of objectifying women. Emecheta writes about this unspoken taboo in society to create consciousness of the challenges young female characters face physically, mentally and emotionally when this form of violence, reflective of the male desire for power, is imposed on female characters to keep them subjugated.

*The Family* (1990) explores Emecheta's representation of the young female character's growth into womanhood. Gwendolen experiences "double rape" in her life, by Uncle Johnny, a trusted neighbor and her father Winston. In her experience of rape, Gwendolen's emotional security is shattered by these male figures in her life that were meant to protect her. When Uncle Johnny forces himself on her, "the iron grip over her mouth", Gwendolen can hardly believe that this was the man "who used to bring her...sweets and lemonade drinks...[and] rub oil on her grazed knee" [16]. He threatens her to keep "this our secret" making her believe that people will think she was "a bad gal" [16]. When the truth comes out of Uncle Johnny's action, ironically Gwendolen finds herself blamed. Her grandmother accuses her of "[rolling] her backside when she moved about...she was a bad girl, inviting trouble" [16]. When Gwendolen finally joins her family in London, she decides she is able to put the past behind her, finally be able to be "like a child again...not a little girl who had to play adult" [16]. Even early in the text, Emecheta shows Gwendolen's sense of maturity in being able to move past her circumstances to look towards the future.

However Gwendolen's hope of a secure childhood is short lived when she is in England. She was expected to be "indispensable to her mother", helping her care for her home and raise her siblings [16]. Her mother, Sonia failed to notice

that Gwendolen sometimes "did not jump at housework she was asked to do" because it never occurred to her that her daughter "needed some time for herself" [16]. Sonia expected her daughter to take up the role of a woman in terms of her duties. She also could not accept an independent Gwendolen who was becoming "confident and free" [16]. When Sonia is away from London for Granny Naomi's funeral, Gwendolen is raped by her father, the man she regarded as "her daddy and daddies did not hurt their daughters" [16]. Here Emecheta "ventures into the forbidden terrain of familial rape" [17]. Winston rapes Gwendolen, justifying that her "flimsy gymslip... [And] her young bosom taunted him" [16]. Shortly after Winston's rape, Gwendolen finds herself pregnant with her father's child and is accused of getting "[hitched] up with a dirty white" boy Emmanuel [16]. Despite her difficulties Gwendolen never reveals who raped and impregnated her. She does this because she realizes that the rest of her family needed her father to "pay for their rent and bring the food money" [16]. In the chapter "*Institutionalized*", when Gwendolen is admitted into a mental hospital to help her cope with her pregnancy, her decision to remain silent about her baby's father shows the metamorphic development of her character into an independent woman. She exudes womanist qualities as she turns into a strong, assertive woman after a traumatic event such as rape and decides to put the needs of her family and her baby before her own situation, "beyond the concerns of self to that concern for the needs of others" [18]. In the psychiatric institution, Gwendolen realizes that she is not mad but traumatised. In this 'madness', Gwendolen decides to keep her baby, a process Liz Gunner refers to as "a new symbolic order" representing Gwendolen's ability to re-shape her future despite the traumatic event that has happened to her [19]. In this situation, even after finding herself emotionally and physically violated by her father, Gwendolen does "[develops] internal control", evolves into a mature woman who decides to keep and raise her baby herself [20]. Even in Winston's death, Gwendolen does not reveal her baby's father but chooses to live an independent life away from her mother, who cannot seem to forgive her for getting pregnant and being a loose woman. At the end of the novel, Sonia is in for a rude shock when she visits Gwendolen, the realization dawning on her that Winston was the baby's father. In contrast however, she sees a different Gwendolen, her metamorphosis complete, "a grown woman in a white running suit, carrying a tray full of tea-things" [16]. Gwendolen fully embraces her role as a 'woman', naming her child Iyamide which means "my mother is here", moving towards subjectivity, away from objectification seen through her experience of rape [16]. The child in this context is used as a symbolic metaphor of womanist qualities embodying warmth, security... [and] comfort" [16]. Gwendolen recognizes her female subjectivity as a 'woman', moving away from the events of her past, to fully embrace her role as a 'mother' to her daughter. Like Kehinde, who has Taiwo as her *chi*, Gwendolen's relationship with her daughter symbolizes the womanist bond between mother and daughter, her daughter inspiring her to rise to her full potential as a 'woman'.

The act of rape as a metaphor for power in Emecheta's

novels does not hinder her young female characters from recognizing their need for their 'female subjectivity and rising to their full potential as 'women'. They refuse to be victims, challenging myths of silence and weakness among Igbo female characters demonstrating the changing and growing strength in the representations of Igbo female characters. Kehinde, Nko and Gwendolen embody the new changes happening to postcolonial female characters. They help redefine the concepts of 'wives' and 'mother' from the colonial period, advocating a revision in the representations of female Igbo characters as 'women'.

### III. CONCLUSION

Colonialism brought about many changes for Igbo women. It changed women's prescribed roles as 'wives' and 'mothers'. These changes challenged them to see themselves outside these changing roles, to view themselves as 'women' and achieve a sense of female subjectivity. While the representation of female characters in the colonial period like Nnu Ego does not portray the Nigerian female character as entirely dynamic and independent, Nnu Ego still reflected womanist characteristics indicative of upcoming changes in Igbo female representations. Emecheta shows through the contemporary representations of Kehinde and Gwendolen and evolving Igbo female characters who debunk myths of male dominance by rising against male subjugation and oppression. They challenge Nigerian male character's perceptions and actions suggesting vehemently that the previous Igbo gender status quo is invalid and disadvantages women.

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