

Volume-1, Issue-VI, Sept- 2017

Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

CONFERENCE

of

**Thiruvalluvar University
College of Arts & Science, Arakkonam.**

on

**"EMERGING TRENDS IN ENGLISH
LANGUAGE & LITERATURE"**



Research maGma

An International Multidisciplinary Journal

ISSN NO- 2456-7078 IMPACT FACTOR- 4.520 VOLUME-1, ISSUE-7, SEPT-2017

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S SELECTED NOVELS

R.Siva

Assistant Professor in English, Veltech Engineering College, Avadi,
Chennai.

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.

KEYWORDS:

Emecheta, Women's Identity, Nigerian women, Slave Girl.

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 Ato 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.

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

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

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

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. Ojebeta is still a child but she now has the work responsibilities of an adult. Ojebeta's facial tattoos and charms symbolize her special individuality; yet Ma Palagada the master orders her to remove her charms. The removal of Onitsha thus represents the removal of her humanity as defines in Ibuzan terms as her charms signify an important aspect of her in Igbo tradition.

In showing the reality behind Ojebeta's rags-to-riches marriage critics feel that the novel is a Eurocentric feminist critique of marriage, an interpretation that allows them to maintain their identification with Ojebeta as a feminist. This identification is brought to an abrupt halt however, when we see how honoured she is when her husband buys her from the MaPalagada. She seems both to suggest this and to add that it is not enough. Such ambiguities appear to be Emecheta's strategy of representing this complex society, one influenced by two contradicting cultures and she again evades the specificity of ideological labeling. This problem can only be resolved if Buchi Emecheta's writing is seen as a Black feminist interpretation which does not get realized in the face of continuing imperialist ideologies. What Buchi Emecheta in her novels shows is that oppression cannot be defeated in monolithic forms. The multiple nature of oppression demands confrontation at all levels without which black women are not likely to get their freedom.

"The Bride Price" illustrates the injustice of male chauvinism and caste restrictions in her native country. "The Bride Price" (1976) begins in Lagos, a port city in Africa. The story is set in, a somewhat industrialized urban centre, will later contrast with the family's move back to the traditional, agrarian society of their ancestral village. Not known to the mother and children of the Odia family, Ezekiel, the father, is dying. It is his farewell to his children that sets the rest of the events in motion. In their culture, a woman without a husband is unable, the reader is told, 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 presenting this transition, Emecheta informs the reader of some of the major conflicts that she will explore in the remaining chapters of the book. She brings up the concept of the bride price, the woman's role in African society, the influence of the Igbo customs upon its members and the clash between these customs and the effects of colonization.

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. To him, the narrator says, this was something to look forward to. Aku-nna, at the age of thirteen, is well aware of the meaning of her name as well as

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

her role in her society. She would not let her father down. She would marry a man who could afford an expensive bride price. This Aku-nna's role, as it is the role of every woman in her society. She would bring in wealth to her family in the form of a good bride price. Then she would bring wealth to her husband's family in the form of children, preferably all males.

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 had left Lagos to visit her homeland in hopes of regaining her fertility and giving Ezekiel another child. 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, as she is walking toward the village on arrival, that Aku-nna meets Chike Ofulue, her future schoolteacher as well as her future husband. "Chike would have outgrown Aku-nna," the narrator states, "and maybe she would come to regard anything there might be between them as mere childish infatuation, if the adults had just left them alone". But the adults do not leave them alone. They tell their children what they can and cannot do without giving them much explanation. Aku-nna eventually learns to disregard their admonitions, relegating them to a substandard of "everyday trivia." Having lost her father to death and her mother to a complete immersion into the Ibo culture, Aku-nna feels isolated. Chike is the only one she can turn to. Chike, for his part, is almost willing to forget about Aku-nna. However, he finds himself drawn to her, and when 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. Chike knows that young men will begin to gather in Aku-nna's house and their fathers will offer her father their bids on Aku-nna's bride price.

Despite several generous attempts by Chike's father, Aku-nna's stepfather refuses to accept a bride price. Aku-nna is well aware of the tribal curse on young wives whose fathers do not accept a bride price: the expectant mother will die in childbirth. In the end, Aku-nna cannot completely step away from the traditions of her people. One of her last statements is that only in death will she win her freedom.

CONCLUSION

In a colonized country like Nigeria and in the setting of Buchi Emecheta's "The Bride Price", 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 all the above novels Buchi Emecheta's firm rejection of sexist black male attitudes impose the role of a feminist on her. Emecheta presents an evaluative and reconstructive survey of the socio-economic, and political activities of traditional Igbo women, their place and participation in the task of communal cultural preservation, economic building and codification of history itself. Emecheta also offers an aesthetic, philosophical and spiritual commentary on the patterned structure of a past pre colonial /colonial patriarchal age, linking this earlier age to the written tradition of our contemporary age. It is a creative act of resurrecting dead / silent female voices, enabling the women concerned through their day-to-day activities to contribute to the continuum of female literary history.

"The Slave Girl" shows how the female slaves were treated in the colonial period and how the male

"Emerging Trends in English Language & Literature"

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. It thus becomes feasible to plug up any lacunae that could interrupt the continuum of black female writings and activism from traditional orator to the modern scripted word. Thus, the rich, historical and experiential knowledge garnered about women of African descent can henceforth serve as inspiration to modern activists who are challenged to transport this knowledge to the wider social community. 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.

REFERENCE:

1. Buchi Emecheta. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Dedria Bryfonski. Vol.14. Detroit: Gale Research Company. 1980.
2. *Black Literature Criticism*. Ed. James.P Draper. Vol.2. London: Gale Research Inc, 1992.
3. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey.W Hunter. Vol.128. USA: Gale Group, 2000
4. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Sharon. R Gunton. Vol.18. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981.
5. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Eds. Daniel.G Marowski and Rojer Matuz. Vol.48. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1988.
6. Cooper, Pameela. "Metamorphosis and Sexuality: Reading the Strange Passions of Disgrace." *Research in African Literatures* 36.4 (2005): 22-39.
7. Emecheta, Buchi. *The Bride Price*, Florence: Heinmann, 1995..
8. Pepek, Gregory. "Women's Roll Before and During the Colonial Period." www.webconnections.com/MES5th/colonial Women_B4.htm