

EMPOWERMENT OF IGBO WOMEN WITH REFERENCE TO BUCHI EMECHETA'S FICTION

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Abstract

Women all over the World are oppressed by the patriarchy centred cultural norms. Especially the miseries of black women are worse than that of all other women. As the feminists have failed to address the woes of the black women, womanists like Alice Walker supported for the liberation of the black women. Buchi Emecheta, as a black womanist writer highlights the blues and woes of the Nigerian women and also shows them the ways to prevail over their predicament.

Keywords: Predicament, miseries, victims, education, immigration, empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Women's predicament has been universal, shifting from culture to culture and nation to nation. Chamber's English dictionary defines 'predicament' as 'an unfortunate or trying position'. Women's plight is caused by patriarchally based cultural standards that award them a universal status of inferiority and troublesomeness. The plight of black women is worse than that of women living in other regions of the world. Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta was born on July 21, 1944 in Lagos, Nigeria, and died on January 25, 2017 in London, England. She married at the age of sixteen and moved to London with her husband from Nigeria in 1962. She mirrors the agony of the ladies of Nigeria's Igbo tribe, to which she belongs. In her novels, she depicts how black women in Africa and the diaspora endure the load of oppression like a mule and are stomped to nothingness. Emecheta, who cares deeply about her fellow ladies, also provides ways for them to be resurrected like a phoenix.

Buchi Emecheta, who regrets the plight of her tribal women, like Naomi Wolf, does not want to abandon them as victims but works to empower them so that they might be saved. Wolf's work, *Fire with Fire*, implies a shift from victim to power feminism. She observes, "Power feminism can not work until we try to make changes in the way we treat ourselves and others. Victim feminism: urges women to identify with powerless even at the expense of taking responsibility for the power they do possess" (FwF 148). Wolf further says that victim feminism casts women as beleaguered, fragile and intuitive angels (147) and power feminism encourages a woman to claim her individual voice and seek what she needs (150). Emecheta pushes her protagonists to assert themselves in obtaining their wants for a good life while uplifting the disadvantaged Igbo women.

Emecheta is a black feminist, or a womanist who is more to black women than a feminist. Alice Walker, a prominent African American feminist in her work, *In Search of Mother's Garden* defines a womanist as, "Womanist is to feminist is as purple to lavender". She elevates womanism by comparing it to the powerful colour purple, which is considered as a royal colour. Walker links feminism with lavender, so it pales in comparison. Emecheta, a womanist according to Alice Walker's definition, teaches black women to be womanish and responsible through her female heroines.

Among about twenty novels Emecheta has written, *Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price*, *Double Yoke*, *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch* have been selected for analysis in this paper. Emecheta's predominant topic in her literature is the miseries and blues of Igbo women, which are proportionate to their diverse cultural characteristics. Among the various cultural norms affecting women are the administration of virginity tests, the transaction of bride money, the expectation of carrying and rearing many children, and the practise of polygamy. The practise of the levirate system and the sexual drive in males led to polygamy, which causes numerous problems for women. Above all, superstition is a death knell for women in this culture. Emecheta uses her fiction to raise awareness about these cultural features.

In the fiction *The Joys of Motherhood* published in 1979 Emecheta narrates the maladies of the protagonist, Nnu Ego, who conforms to the cultural norms of the Igbo tribe. Her husband marries a second wife since she fails to have a child soon after their marriage. Nnu Ego is an unfortunate victim of African society, which considers a nude woman to be a curse. The tale,

which depicts her emotional torment of being childless, also explores her dissatisfaction with her second husband, Nnaife, having nearly nine children. Despite the fact that she fulfils her cultural expectation of having numerous children and raising them, her life is full with hardships. To add salt to her wound, her unemployed husband engages in polygamy by inheriting his brother's widows and marries a young lady in order to satisfy his passion. The entire family is impoverished, and Nnu Ego bears the load of poverty like a mule.

Though Nnu Ego abandons her pitiful existence of complying to society standards, she secretly communicates a powerful message to her fellow women. She laments saying, "When will I be free? Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood (...). The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die (...). We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build" (187). It is the author Emecheta, who speaks through Nnu Ego. Though she portrays her protagonist as a victim of societal standards, she urges other women to overcome their mentality of yielding to men's will and to courageously decide their own way of life.

The protagonist of *The Bride Price* with the name Akunna meaning, 'her father's wealth' is a contrast to Nnu Ego. She is educated and breaks all Igbo social standards. Despite being abducted and forced into marriage with someone she despises, she elopes and marries her own instructor, Chike, whom she adores. The tradition of the bridegroom paying bride price to the bride's father encompasses various facets in a family as well as in society. Right from the birth of a female kid, her father begins to expect a large sum as wedding price and raises her with the same aim, calling her Akunna. A superstitious notion that if the bride's father does not like the guy and refuses to take the wedding price offered by him, the girl would die during giving birth exacerbates the situation. In the instance of Akunna, her stepfather, who inherited her family following her father's death, refuses to take the marriage price offered by Chike's father, a former slave, and she also dies after giving birth to a kid. Emecheta attempts to establish that her death was an accident caused by her frailty, but her death appears to be a warning to other females.

Emecheta through her protagonists reveals that women possess an inherent strength to fight against victimisation and to come up successfully. She describes how that strength is manifested through Akunna, who is in a desperate state about to be raped. She writes, "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" (136). Women are empowered to live a joyful life when they have this strength and education. Education enables Akunna to transcend the social stigma of marrying a slave from a slave family. Education empowers her to disregard the superstitious idea about the bride price. Despite her terrible death, her wish to name her kid Joy suggests that she has had a joyful life of her own choosing.

Emecheta's work *Double Yoke* discusses the multiple traditional yokes that Igbo women wear around their necks. In accordance to the title, the protagonist, Nko, a Calabar University student, may be trapped in a double yoke. Her wants to marry her sweetheart, Ete Kamba, and to obtain an education appear to be the two yokes around her neck. The Igbo black culture wants women to remain virgins when they marry and performs a test by laying a towel on the cot and looking for blood stains on it on the first night. The discovery of a blood stain on the towel causes a celebration with wine and a feast, but an unstained towel causes upheaval in the bride's life. One of the key topics of this novel *Double Yoke* is such a detrimental societal practise.

Ete Kamba, who seduces Nko in a premarital affair by having her stand by a wall at night, subsequently returns to that location and hunts for a blood stain to certify her virginity. With no stain to be found, his culturally conditioned masculine psyche begins to doubt her chastity. When their professor Ikot learns about this incident, he sexually exploits Nko. These guys become extra yokes for Nko, and her life is nearly devastated as a result.

Nko is no longer a rape victim. She resurrects like a phoenix from being raped and rejected. She promises to pursue her degree in order to advance in life, and she threatens Ikot with a first-class honours degree in exchange. She also decides not to terminate Ikot's child and walks around with his baby. She refuses to be dominated by patriarchal culture; instead, she rises up and expresses herself.

Emecheta's novel demonstrates how vain and insignificant cultural traditions are. Nko ignores the man who is looking for her virginity and invalidates the virginity test. Through the life of Nnu Ego, Emecheta demonstrates the futility of conducting virginity tests. Nnu Ego, who is shown to be a virgin in her first marriage but fails to have children due to their superstitious notion that a virgin will have children immediately. The difficulty of proving oneself to be a virgin is utterly irrelevant in her second marriage, and she has several children, including two pairs of twins. Akunna skilfully leverages the notion in her favour by telling Okoboshi a falsehood as he prepares to rape her after forcibly marrying her. She tells the virginity-seeking tribal guy that she has already slept with Chike and escapes unscathed.

Buchi Emecheta exhorts the women of her tribe to recognise their predicament, like Nnu Ego, and work to overcome injustice, like Nko and Akunna. She suggests immigration and education as effective ways to achieve liberty together with traits like self-assurance and religious conviction. By using these methods, Emecheta's ladies do not die as victims but instead come back to life like a phoenix.

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