

The New Woman in Buchi Emechata's Novels

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Abstract

Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian female writer specializes in portraying her female characters as doubly marginalized, subjugated in patriarchal society. This paper intends to analyze her female characters showing how they struggle from tradition to modernity. She says "I work towards the liberation of women. My books are about survival, just like my own life." All her female characters embody womanhood, emphasizing the role of wife and mothers through their self-will. Gwendolen, Adah and Nnu ego are womanist representation of Nigerian female characters through which who achieves their agency, subjectivity and determination through redefining their responsibilities as women, wives and mothers.

KEYWORDS : womanist, marginalization, subjugation, rape, metamorphosis.

Buchi Emecheta an Ibusa village girl who had the spirit to survive all odds-poverty, undernourished childhood, early loss of parents, shifting and living from one relatives to another, emotional and physical turmoil. From early childhood she had the talent of spinning stories, narrating it to her friends. Once when her school teacher beat her in front of the class for announcing that she wanted to be a writer, she bore the pain in silence and became more determined than ever to make her transgressive dream a reality. Buchi was a compulsive writer, would write on her dining table, bouncing ideas round the kitchen table, singing songs, cooking, and planning her next novels. A writer inspired by her culture and experience, Buchi's oeuvre is extensive. She highlights the Nigerian woman's struggle in defending and insisting for her female independence and agency. Buchi has become immortal by creating female characters like Gwendolen, Adah Obi, Nnu Ego and Kehinde. These are representation of womanism as she calls them and not feminist characters.

In the novel *The Family*, Gwendolen is the young female character who is raped by her own father and her neighbor whom she calls uncle. The role of woman is explored fully by Buchi through Gwendolen. Gwendolen matures into an understanding of her personhood as 'a woman' through the traumatic experience of rape. The writer uses rape as an act of physical violence and as a metaphor to describe these young female character metamorphosis into womanhood. Buchi 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 maturity of protecting herself as a woman, Gwendolen is sexually violated twice in the novel and becomes pregnant. Instead of being crippled by her experience, the 'child' she carries 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. Rape is a common motif in the novel *The Family* and theme which not only reflects physical usurpation of the female body but also an extreme act of objectifying women. Buchi Emecheta writes about rape the

unspoken taboo in Nigerian 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 act of rape as a metaphor for power in Buchi 's novels does not hinder her young female characters.

The Family 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". He threatens her to keep "this our secret" making her believe that people will think she was "a bad gal". 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". 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". 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. 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". 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". 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". Here Emecheta "ventures into the forbidden terrain of familial rape". Winston rapes Gwendolen, justifying that her "flimsy gymslip... [And] her young bosom taunted him". 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. 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". 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". 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. 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 . 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” . 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 . The child in this context is used as a symbolic metaphor of womanist qualities embodying warmth, security... [and] comfort” . 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’.

They refuse to be victims, challenging myths of silence and weakness among Igbo female characters demonstrating the changing and growing strength in the representation of Igbo female characters.

Adah Obi , In *Second –Class Citizen* is a determined person through her entire life and strives for more. She marries, only to continue her education , and works hard to better life for herself and for her children. Francis Obi, her husband insists that they are second class citizens. Adah realizes he is not a good husband and hence leaves him. Adah Obi was born in a typical patriarchal family, her birth as a girl was not accepted as everyone in the family wanted a boy. Discriminated at home, her younger brother was always appreciated and encouraged. Since little Adah is not allowed to attend school as a part of this patriarchal order in the community. Adah finds a way on her own to challenge the norms at that age . She hopes that her teacher at school will understand her desire to be educated . Adah is beaten by her family due to her desire. Adah felt Mr.Cole should have asked her why she came, but being reassured by his smile, she said in her little loud voice ,*“I came to school..... my parents would not send me* .Adah scribbled away enjoying the smell of craw-craw and dried sweats. She never forgot this smell of school. Pa would be all right ,he would probably cane her,you know , just a few strokes—six or so, not much –but Ma would not cane, she would smack and smack and then nag and nag all day long .” This courageous action actually gives clues about the rest of Adah’s life , particularly about her attitude toward the social structure . The fact that she goes to school which is not allowed by her parents is quite meaningful . She is assertive , tries to make her own decisions, sometimes about the grown-ups around her. Adah divorces her tormenting husband continues her education, gets a degree and works for her children. Adah succeeds in recovering her lost identity and home caused by the traditional stereotyping of African women. Adah’s western education and her employment as a librarian in the American Consulate library at Campbell street in London opens a way to a new life as a promising writer even though she struggles with her four children and another child in her womb. She takes charge of her own life as well as her children’s single handedly in a white man’s country. The journey towards a new identity in a new home can be said to begin for her at the end of the novel which has given the true meaning of her existence.

The Joys of Motherhood deals with the twin forces of race and gender oppression. In the traditional African culture women are defined by men—initially by their fathers, their husbands and then their sons. Nnu Ego is the most traditional of Buchi Emecheta's heroines. The novel tells the story of Nnu Ego, a dutiful Nigerian wife and mother. She is rejected by her first husband Amatokwu for being childless. She subsequently marries Nnaife, a city man of faraway Lagos. She finds him unattractive but resigns herself to, and eventually bears several children. She suffers poverty and humiliation in a traditional polygamous marriage, the stigma of barrenness and pressure placed on African women to produce male children. Her fulfillment is centered on her desire to uphold motherhood and to see her children happy and prosperous. But Nnu Ego never experiences the "joys" of motherhood, but she faces many disappointments and finds her grown up children unhappy. Nnu Ego compares her life as a mother to that of slaves in which "Her love and duty for her children were like chain of slavery". Instead of traditional vision of children as a source of joy and wealth she feels her husband and children are millstone around the mother's neck or as greedy insects who suck out and drain her life's blood. For her own misfortune and other disasters, she considers herself responsible. At the end of the novel, she dies and her children throws her a lavish and expensive funeral. She has suffered all her life and had lived out her final days alone she gave birth to eight children but in her final days no one was there with her to care and love her. Her only desire had been to be a complete woman in her society. Her children honour her and build a shrine. Buchi Emecheta said, 'I created a woman who had eight children and died by the wayside. She tried to convey the message that having so many children does not mean you are going to be rich in your old age'.

Buchi Emecheta through her heroines exposes the marginalization, discrimination that existed in the traditional patriarchal Nigerian society. The sole purpose of Buchi's writings was to educate womankind and set themselves free from the traditional bindings especially African woman from various oppressive forces such as sexism and racism is evident from the messages present in the novel. As a woman writer, she felt the need to instill a realization in women especially that the long silenced voices of women can be heard and a time has arrived for women to remove the social stigma attached to women in every patriarchal society.

Thus, one can safely admit that her feminism is universal and shares many commonalities with the other feminist writers of the world.

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