

Tradition, Modernity and Projection of Female Body in Buchi Emecheta's Oeuvre

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of the female body as a site of cultural expectation, patriarchal control, and changing identity in Buchi Emecheta's novels, particularly in *Second Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*. The study embraces a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary methodology, drawing from feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, and relies on thematic and text-based analysis to study representations of marriage, motherhood, and women's agency in Nigerian socio-cultural contexts. It demonstrates that although Emecheta offers critiques of oppressive traditions under patriarchy, she also acknowledges these traditions' cultural merit, and calls for a process of institutional reform, instead of outright rejecting traditions. The struggles faced by characters demonstrate that in and of itself, modernity cannot displace gender hierarchies, as patriarchy is only one institution and it adapts to circumstance. This research also highlights a more nuanced feminist orientation to Emecheta's vision, informed by African reality, and demands that structural, political, and cultural changes take place in order for women to experience autonomy, dignity, and freedom.

Keywords: *tradition, modernity, patriarchy, motherhood, female body, feminist literary criticism, postcolonial feminism.*

1. Introduction

The intersection of gender and post-colonialism is one of the most significant areas of inquiry in contemporary literary and cultural studies. In the wake of colonialism, formerly colonized societies have been engaged in complex processes of identity formation, cultural reclamation, and sociopolitical restructuring (Ashcroft, et al., 9-15). Nevertheless, whereas nationalist and anti-colonial discourses have predominantly concentrated on matters of race, sovereignty, and economic emancipation, the particular experiences of women in postcolonial contexts have often been marginalized or neglected. Women have endured the dual burden of colonial tyranny and indigenous patriarchy, encountering distinct types of subordination that cannot be comprehended through a solely nationalist or gender-neutral perspective (Chaudhary, 47-56).

Buchi Emecheta was a Nigerian author who adeptly articulated her personal experiences and perspectives on women in her society through her novels. Women are obstructed from receiving education, their virginity is questioned, and they are regarded as inferior by a male-dominated society (Mironenko, 25-28).

Being a woman writer in Africa means being a witness to the ways women are silenced, and writing becomes an act of survival –Buchi Emecheta (Davies, 56-61).

Emecheta, in her novels 'Double Yoke' and 'Kehinde,' precisely depicts women who are prohibited from pursuing higher education and living autonomously, as they are regarded as inferior in society and subjected to suppression. Female authors departed from their previous works and began to articulate women's experiences through their feminine literature in a novel manner. Buchi Emecheta illustrates the struggles women face to achieve their aspirations and assert their identity within a patriarchal culture, while simultaneously preserving both traditional and modern values. Her female protagonists battle to assert their self-identity within a patriarchal culture. The juxtaposition of tradition and modernity is shown as a dual burden in the novels *Double Yoke* and *Kehinde* (Fubara, 18-28).

Florence Buchi Emecheta, whose novels predominantly address the challenging and inequitable status of women in both immigrant and African societies, was born in Nigeria in 1944 and relocated to London in 1962, where she passed away in 2017. She authored several notable works, including *The Joys of the Mother* (1979), *In the Ditch* (1972), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), all of which have received acclaim from critics in both England and Africa. Her novel, *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), recounts the struggles of Adah, an Ibo lady who relocates to England to reside with her Nigerian student husband, only to realise that life for a young Nigerian woman in London during the 1960s is bleak. Marginalised by British society and impeded by her husband, who demands her subservience, she is compelled to confront her existence as a second-class citizen (OLÚGÚNLÈ, 49).

Emecheta formally presents her contentious perspectives on gender, marriage, heterosexuality, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage at the Second African Women's Conference in Stockholm, Sweden. Subsequently, her feminism would contest traditions, recognise the permanence of biological determinism, while also note the existence of varying degrees of maleness and femaleness beyond intersex individuals, specifically those not distinctly born with male or female genitalia (Pucherova, 105-122). Therefore, division of labor along sex lines with- out due consideration of the gender factor is a mistake, she affirms, a mistake that is the root cause of violent interactions between men and women in the institutions of family, workplace, and systems of government. She argues that males and females have the ability to cross gender lines when necessary and should also be countenanced and supported. Nonetheless, she affirms intriguingly that same-sex relationships and intra-gender sexual desire (read homosexuality), are deviances. Observe that Emecheta's life history mirrors this misnomer as well, for she lived the better part of her adult life as a female head of her family, meaning, a de facto male (DAVIES, 56-61). Following are some famous work of Buchi Emecheta:

- **Second-Class Citizen (1974)**

Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) is a notable work of postcolonial literature that depicts the colonial other with specific ideological influences. This article examines Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* to elucidate how the author depicts the colonial other from a postcolonial view point. This study utilises Postcolonial theory, namely Said's Orientalist framework. The other succinctly denotes a uniform entity, fixated on emotions dictated by race rather than individuality, personality, and deliberate choice. In postcolonial studies, the notion of the "Other" refers to cultural representation or the portrayal of the colonised by the colonisers, as well as the West's hegemony over the non-Western world (Abubakaret al., 1534–1539).

This semi-autobiographical novel narrates the story of Adah, a Nigerian woman who migrates to London and faces racial and gender discrimination. The title itself reflects how colonialism and migration render African women invisible and subordinate.

- **Colonial Education:** Adah's dream of going to school symbolizes both empowerment and alienation.
- **Marriage and Subordination:** Her marriage to Francis showcases the oppressive gender roles transplanted from Nigerian patriarchy into diasporic life.
- **Racialized Gender Identity:** Adah is doubly marginalized as a black woman in Britain, where race and gender intersect.

Emecheta critiques both British racism and Nigerian patriarchy, positioning Adah as a figure of resistance and transformation (Sene, 127-137).

- **The Bride Price (1976)**

Buchi Emecheta's 1976 novel *The Bride Price* explores female identity and illustrates how women are transformed into abject beings due to oppression and subordination. The bride's price, or dowry, refers to the transfer of wealth from the groom's family to the bride's family at

the time of marriage. This may be interpreted as a symbolic transaction, possibly signifying the worth attributed to the bride. The bride's price may be perceived as a mechanism that designates the bride as an item of exchange, thus diminishing her economic worth and engendering a sense of abjection. Examining The Bride Price is important for various reasons: It aids in comprehending the cultural background and historical origins (Akhter, & Al-Kadery, 20-29).

In The Bride Price, Aku-nna is a young girl, whose life is shaped by the practice of bride price, symbolizing how women are commodified in traditional societies.

- **Cultural Constraints:** Aku-nna's love for a schoolteacher defies societal norms.
- **Gender and Death:** Her death serves as a symbolic critique of a society that punishes female autonomy.
- **Education as Liberation:** The novel suggests education as a pathway to freedom, albeit with tragic consequences.

Emecheta critiques cultural traditions not by denying their significance but by showing how they can be reformed to respect women's autonomy (Fidan, & Yeşil, 151-163).

• **The Slave Girl (1977)**

The Slave Girl narrates the tale of Ojebeta, who is sold into slavery in colonial Nigeria. It depicts traditional society while simultaneously illustrating the dehumanising impact of colonisation. Jean Fagan Yellin contends that Jacobs's work is the inaugural text to confront the sexual exploitation of women in the context of slavery, referencing a passage from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Moore, 3-20).

- **Internalized Oppression:** Ojebeta's journey shows how slavery deforms selfhood.
- **Resistance and Survival:** Her eventual decision to marry for love and reclaim autonomy challenges both patriarchal and colonial expectations.
- **Feminist Awakening:** The novel represents the emergence of feminist consciousness even within oppressive structures (Sindhu, & Sathurappasamy, 49-53).

2. **Research Methodology**

The study uses a qualitative research, interpretive, and interdisciplinary approach, based on feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, examining Buchi Emecheta's select novels using thematic and textual analysis, interpreting representations of patriarchy, marriage, motherhood, and female identity using the socio-cultural and historical contexts of Nigeria, emphasizing connections of tradition and modernity on women's agency, resistance, and subjectivity.

3. **Patriarchy, Marriage, and Motherhood in Emecheta's Works**

Buchi Emecheta's fiction is a deep and sometimes painful exploration of how patriarchal codes, various marriage customs, and assumptions about motherhood regulated the lives of women in Nigeria (both pre-independence and post-independence), and the intersection of these forces to regulate the female body and constrain women's autonomy. Emecheta's work draws on her and

the women's lives around her, creating fictional representations that help portray a world where patriarchal customs are a social institution rather than someone's personal views; they are communicated vertically (through family, community, and state) horizontally (through the normative structures of social biography), and reinforced by the narratives surrounding honour, duty, and respectability (Gueye, 45-52).

In Emecheta's writing, motherhood might be the most complex and ambivalent institution. Despite cultural ideals valorizing motherhood in African culture as the ultimate achievement of womanhood, motherhood also serves as a burden that ties women to cycles of fatigue, economic hardship, and social invisibility. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego embodies and experiences this paradox. Because she has married with a cultural mindset that one's worth is dependent upon one's ability to produce babies, especially males, Nnu Ego initially experiences shame upon her failure to conceive. And even when she achieves motherhood, her life is inundated with never-ending labour, poverty, and sacrifice without personal fulfilment or acknowledgement. The novel's ironic title heightens the critique of how motherhood is romanticized in cultural discourses of motherhood while at the same time often destroying women's physical health and compromising their autonomy and sense of self (Ghazal, 12-24).

Western education, urbanization, and wage labour afford her characters glimpses of independence, but equally they also put them into new forms of discrimination and exploitation. These moments show that the elimination of old customs alone may not be enough to achieve women's freedom (Sadouk, & Bennouar, 34-37). For example, in *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah uses her education to gain employment in London, yet she realizes that being an economically independent woman doesn't free her from the double burden associated with wage work and domestic work, nor from her husband's power and control over her earnings. In moments like these, Emecheta shows that patriarchy is flexible even in modern contexts, and while it might change from age, gender hierarchies can remain stable. So, after education, even among educated and urbanized Nigerians, it still measures a woman's respectability in marriage, and, regardless of new economic realities, motherhood remains a moral obligation. Emecheta therefore tilts against simplified narratives that marry modernization to liberation, instead calling for deeper social, political and cultural change in gender relations and society's attitudes to women's bodies (Lipman, 5-9).

Moreover, Emecheta's portrayal of patriarchal traditions, marriage, and motherhood are never simplistic. While often conveying the oppressive nature of such traditions, she recognizes the cultural meanings and emotional attachments they might embody. For many of her characters, traditions represent a way of belonging and a way of self-identifying. The dissolution of traditions, encouraged by modernity and migrations to diverse places, can be a source of confusion and displacement. This ambivalence prevents her feminist readings from being entirely anti-traditional; instead, her work advocates for a critical re-thinking of cultural practices that honors women's agency and autonomy over their own bodies. The narratives indicate the

difficulty of throwing out traditions in their entirety; rather, the job is to change the ways in which identities discriminated against gender and marginalized women's lives (Lipman, 5-9).

Patriarchal traditions, marriage customs, and motherhood assumptions shape the trio of themes central to Buchi Emecheta's literary world. These three areas of research are the sites of struggle over women's bodies, identities and futures. By basing her stories on the lived experiences of Nigerian women, Emecheta foregrounds the complex relationship between personal life and socio-cultural structures, illustrating the extent to which women's bodies are expected to bear the responsibility for family honour, economic viability, and cultural continuity. By exposing the costs--physical, emotional, economic--of these expectations, Emecheta asks readers to think about how patriarchal systems continue to perpetuate these demands through tradition, but also through adapting to modernity. Ultimately, the marriage and motherhood are neither as core moral values nor as economic exchanges, but as free choices based on equality and respect for one another. This point of view remains pertinent, with relevance well beyond the Nigerian context in light of struggles for gender justice across the world (Mohamed Kunhi, 27-36).

4. Gendered Subjectivity in *The Joys of Motherhood*

Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, tell of her experiences but also of the socio-political and historical challenges women face. By studying her work, we can better understand the correlation between colonialism and patriarchy in limiting women's agency and the strategies women use to resist, survive, and reinvent (Talukdar, 35-37).

• The Joys of Motherhood (1979)

The advent of Women's Writings prompted women to seek their position in African culture, marking the inception of empowered women following years of subjugation. Ultimately, they discovered their voices through writing, as their fervent aspiration for freedom and recognition as equal citizens, rather than as subservient beings within their communities, motivated them to employ literature as a powerful medium to convey and share their narratives of suffering and oppression. Literature provided women. Flora Nwapa, the Nigerian author, was the inaugural African woman to address women's circumstances in her writings. She emphasised the daily experiences of Igbo women in her novel *Efuru* (1966). In her work *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), renowned Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta illustrates the dire condition of African women through the protagonist, Nnu Ego (Kebdi, & Iamrache, 114-121).

The narrative chronicles Nnu Ego whose self-identity is inextricably connected to her childbearing abilities. When her first marriage ends in her sterility, she remarries Nnaife a laundry man in Lagos and eventually becomes a mother to many children. However, Nnu Ego is dominated by poverty, psychological isolation and the demands of motherhood and family. In rural Igbo traditions, children are perceived as a woman's wealth and security, while in an urban colonial context, motherhood of multiple children only increases Nnu Ego's misery. Nnu Ego is

a dutiful and sacrificing mother, but her children grow up to lead their life while her role is confined to mothering (Ben Mohammed, & Matmar, 134-145).

Emecheta's picture illustrates the disconnect of tradition to modernity, demonstrating the effects of colonial economic systems and urban migration on the destruction of communal support systems and on gender.

I work toward the liberation of women, but I am not a feminist. I only deal with the women's problems as I see them from the African woman's point of view – Buchi Emecheta (Ali et al. 33-37).

The men in the story, and men like Nnaife, are placed in a situation in which they lose their traditional place as provider and, thus, the women must undertake a new financial and emotional burden. Emecheta writes in a realist tradition that incorporates oral storytelling, showcasing the chaos of a society in transition and the cost of that transition personally. Symbolism runs throughout the text, particularly the idea of motherhood, the pride and the shackle of responsibility not allowing freedom for women. It is a pillar of African feminist literature, particularly for not romanticizing the hardship of women, and for its explicit representation of the realities of finances and emotions attached to motherhood, particularly in the African context. By dismantling the notion that children bring happiness and security, *The Joys of Motherhood* compels its readers to interrogate the accepted and entrenched cultural realities of gender, family, and a woman's status in society. It speaks just as much to the present as it did in the 1970's, as we need to address the issues of patriarchy and colonialism, poverty, and female agency (Benelhadj, & Hachemi, 63-71).

This novel critiques the romanticization of motherhood in African societies. Nnu Ego, the protagonist, sacrifices everything for her children, only to face abandonment and loneliness.

- **Tradition vs. Modernity:** Emecheta explores the pressures of tradition in a changing colonial and postcolonial Lagos.
- **Economic Marginalization:** Nnu Ego's poverty undercuts the supposed joy of motherhood.
- **Gender and Labor:** The novel reveals how unpaid reproductive labor sustains both colonial economies and patriarchal families.

Emecheta redefines motherhood from a feminist perspective, revealing it as a site of exploitation rather than fulfillment (Ben Mohammed & Matmar, 134-145).

5. Critical Reception and Legacy

Buchi Emecheta's contribution to postcolonial and feminist literature has been widely recognized, though not without initial resistance. Her reception, especially in the early years of her writing career, reveals the tensions between mainstream African literary discourse and gender-focused narratives. Over time, however, Emecheta came to be celebrated as a pioneering

voice in African women's writing, and her work has become a cornerstone of postcolonial feminist studies (Ali, et al., 33-37).

- **Early Reception: Marginalization within African Literary Circles**

The 1970s and early 1980s were a time of little recognition of Emecheta's work by the male dominated African literary critique, which preferred issues of nationalism and anti-colonialism to issues of gender. Often critics dismissed women's stories as domestic or apolitical, completely missing that Emecheta's focus on maternity, marriage, migration, and female subjectivity was a political intervention. Authors like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka were writing an account of African literature that presented themes around colonialism and nation creation, but generally historians' new nationalist ideas often erased the specific experience of women. Emecheta's refusal of mythologised motherhood and traditional values challenged the romanticised notions of African culture reinforced by male nationalist authors.

- **Western Feminist Reception**

In contrast, Western feminist researchers and audiences, as noted in my literature review, loved Emecheta's works, particularly because they maintained a legitimate portrayal of the dilemma's black women face. They found her writings valued because they challenged Eurocentric representations of African women as voiceless and victimized. Nevertheless, there was sometimes tension with certain Western audiences who attempted to universalize Emecheta's feminist themes without acknowledging the specific context i.e. cultural and historical narratives of her novels. Emecheta had reservations about being called a feminist as it is understood within the Western context, in interviews she described herself as a "feminist with a small f" indicating that while she supported women's rights, her perspectives were based on African realities, not Western ideals. She wanted to change tradition and not reject it.

- **Academic Recognition and Canonization**

In the 1990s, gender-conscious frameworks took hold of critical examinations of African literature, renewing scholarly interest in Emecheta, from a new perspective. Scholars began examining Emecheta's work from an intersectional lens, which explores the intersection of race, gender, class, and colonial background in creating complex forms of oppression. Critical anthologies such as Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature (1986) and Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power (1998) included works of Emecheta. Scholars including Florence Stratton, Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, and Carole Boyce Davies came to analyse Emecheta's literary works using postcolonial feminist theory, praising her complex depiction of African female identity (Mohamed Kunhi, 27-26).

6. Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's writing offers a site of intersection between a postcolonial critique and a feminist consciousness, accentuating the plight, resilience, and agency of African women negotiating the conflict between tradition and modernity. Emecheta's novels such as *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, and *The Slave Girl*, all critique patriarchal

conventions, marital expectations and motherhood ideologies among African cultures that convey orders that work to restrict female bodies and lives, while prescribing the presumed important role of women in cultural society. Simply because modernity exists, does not eliminate systemic attitudes towards gender roles that objectify women; individual liberation requires a re-contextualizing of women's social, political and cultural existence in the world as predominantly valuable in their reproductive duties. Although Emecheta often depicts her characters as taking action amidst their socio-cultural constraints, her characters articulate desires of self-determination which renders her work as not simply personal and political as also calls for substantial reworking of so-called relations between genders.

When a woman is wealthy, she rules her home. When she is poor, she bears the weight of everyone else's wealth -The Joys of Motherhood (Ben Mohammed and Matmar, 134-145)

Emecheta connects an African reality to feminist discourse in a way that does not glorify tradition or reject it altogether. She understands the emotional and cultural investments that traditions have, all the while advocating for change that promotes women's autonomy and dignity. Emecheta builds relationships and avoids direct opposition, helping to resist the binary nature of oppression and liberation, and highlighting the ambivalences, contradictions, and negotiations at play in women lived experiences. Over the decades, Emecheta's artistic body of work has evolved from being marginalized in African literatures to being acknowledged as canonical texts in postcolonial feminist discourse. Emecheta situates women's personal struggles against historical, socio-economic, and colonial realities and her work will always serve as a challenge to African and global actors to think about how gender, culture, and power intersect—the continued relevance of her work in contemporary debates on gender justice remains powerful.

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