

Gender and Sexuality: Analysis of Female Crisis in Buchi Emecheta's Novels

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Abstract

This research work is anchored on feminist theory. Buchi Emecheta is one of the African feminist writers that is concerned about women and sees women as being handicapped merely because they are female. This study therefore analyses Buchi Emecheta's novels using eclectic approach. The research methodology used for this study involves critical textual and discourse analysis of Buchi Emecheta's novels. This research examines the female gender crisis in Buchi Emecheta's novels and discovers for instance, that persistent inequality between men and women in her works is as a result of contradictory culturally imposed social values. These gender crises in her works are depicted in the following themes: the predicament of being a girl child, societal conspiracy against womanhood, women as chattels of trade and property for sale, polygamous marriages and tyranny of the patriarchy. Buchi Emecheta presents education as the most essential weapon for challenging gender inequality.

Introduction

Gender may be referred to as sex that is, being male or female. It is a range of physical, mental and behavioural characteristics distinguishing between masculine and feminine. Sexuality on the other hand is a confused word. This stems from the confusion in our very language between sex, meaning male or female and sex, meaning sexual activity. Because of women's oppression as a sex, sexuality has inevitably been one of the most vital topics for feminist examination. The term 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably in every day speech in scholarly writings. Sex involves biological characteristics in humans. According to Arliss (1990:45), "sex refers to biological category. Each of us can be labeled either male or female at birth based on observable physical evidence that is, the nature of the genitalia..." Also, she adds that, 'masculine and feminine gender may be understood as gender terms that cannot be assigned at birth, but inferred based on individual behaviour. Therefore, gender must be enacted while sex is assigned.

A gender role is a set of social and behavioural norms that are generally considered appropriate for either a man or woman in a social or interpersonal relationship. It can be viewed as culturally specific assignment of traits and roles to each sex: male or female. That is why one can say that generally feminine gender has the following characteristics -submissive, emotional, dependent, fragile, gentle, quiet, tactful, sensible, yielding and verbal while the masculine gender has the following characteristics: aggressive, rational, independent, strong, rough, loud, blunt, insensitive, competitive and physical activity oriented.

The issue of gender inequality dates back to the ancient times. In the western world for instance, it was operated on the assumption that women are inferior creatures. Dobie, (2009: 105) notes that

leading thinkers from Aristotle to Charles Darwin reiterated that women were lesser beings, and one does not have to look hard to find comments from writers, theologians and other public figures that disparage and degrade women. The Greek ecclesiast John Chrysostom (ca-AD 343-497) called women “a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil....”

Women are an oppressed class regardless of their social hierarchy. They are meant to cook, bring up children and serve their husbands commands. From experience, one observes that women are not recognised and therefore are denied the political, legal, social, job opportunities and even marital rights. They are denied such opportunities on the ground of gender. If they are married; they give their properties to their husbands. According to Wollstonecraft in, Ann (2009:106), “having experienced as a child, the imbalance of power between her own mother and father and having observed as an adult the indignities suffered by women of all classes, she recognizes that they are born into ‘powerless’ roles’. As a result, Wollstonecraft asserts that, “women are forced to use manipulative methods to get what they want”. She argues for women, “to be duly prepared by education to be companions of men.” She also calls for the members of her own sex “to take charge of their lives by recognising that their abilities are equal to those of men, to define their identities for themselves, and to carve out their own roles in society”.

Theoretical framework

The theory of feminism was introduced to oppose the patriarchy structure. Feminism is largely a socio-political movement which developed from the 1960’s onwards and whose purpose is to better the lots of women. Feminism at its most basic definition is simply a movement fighting for equal rights of women. It is also a proposal for social transformation of women. Over the years, the term feminism has earned itself some terrible connotations such as bra-burning, man haters who reject anything that falls under the term ‘feminine’. In fact, feminists never burned their bras, and do not hate men, rather, they fight for women to have the choice to do what they want to do. The idea behind feminism is that all women have the choice to do what they want to do like men.

Showalter in Ann’s *Theory into practice...* (2009:107) acknowledges that, today there is no single strand of feminism or feminist criticism”. Akachi Adimora, Ezeigbo (1996) identifies two types of feminism – ‘the radical and liberal’. There are other feminist theories such as marxist, Stiwanist and Womanist.

African feminists have no violence and militarism. Feminists like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba and others find fault in the type of delineation given to female characters in many male authored texts. These writers and other critics argue that even at the best imaginative writing by men, they are not accurate representation of the actual position of women in society. In the African feminists view, nobody can apprehend and faithfully reflect the complexities of the condition of women better than the women themselves. In Africa and in Nigeria in particular, the story of women is basically that of the second class citizen. There are different levels of

subordination of women to be found in Africa compared to the Western World. While African feminism focuses on socio-cultural (communal) existence or relations, western feminism incorporates issues concerning sexuality, lesbianism and homosexuality. These experiences are totally outside the African women's experience.

African feminists find the label 'feminist too strong a tag to bear. The reason is fear of societal ostracism. Surprisingly, these pioneer female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta and others reject feminism even though their works and thematic concern as women writers clearly portray them as feminists.

Research methodology

The research methodology used for this study involves a critical textual and discourse analysis of Buchi Emecheta's novels: *Second Class Citizen*, *The Slave Girl*, *Joys of Motherhood* and *Double Yoke*. In identifying the ideologies inherent in these novels, the researcher did a critical reading of these texts and also, applied the feminist discourse theory as the theoretical frame work in the analysis.

Buchi Emecheta's novels reflect the sorrow, anguish and strength with which women confront the burdens of traditional African life in a changing society. Her novels under examination include: *The Second Class Citizen* (1975), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), and *The Double Yoke* (1981). Her novels deal with the clash between western and traditional values through the portrayal of female characters who challenge their roles as beasts of burden and who strive for economic and societal independence. For Ogunyemi (1988:62), "Emecheta's works reveal her as a radical feminist though she is womanist in her pronouncements".

This essay traces the developmental features of Buchi Emecheta's feminism as seen in her portrayal of female characters from slave girl prototype to the career mother, and single fulfilled woman.

Themes in Buchi Emecheta's Four Novels

1. Theme of predicament of being a girl child

Buchi Emecheta central theme in almost all her novels is about women, the feminine gender. According to Buchi Emecheta, in, "*feminism with a small f*" in Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quaison's *Africa literature: An Anthology of criticism and theory* (2007:553), "being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes". The emotional, sexual and psychological stereotyping of woman begins when she is born a girl. The predicament of being a girl child is paramount in her works.

In *Joys of Motherhood*, the central theme is the predicament of the girl-child. There is emphasis on a male child. A female child is not given the kind of attention that the male one receives. No wonder Ona was not allowed to marry because Obi Umunna wanted her to remain a mistress so that she could bear a male child for him. Ona agrees with Nwokocho Agbadi that, 'if I have a son, he will belong to my father, but if a girl; she will be yours (1979:25). A female child is nothing to Obi Umunna and so he can dispense with it but not for a male child. In the world of *Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta also deconstructs the belief in traditional practice that women are inferior and less articulate. In *Joys of motherhood*, a woman is expected to think stupid that is, she is not supposed be a rational being. That was why Nwokocho Agbadi had rebuked his Ona when he felt she was being too intelligent. He told her that she is in the first weeks of motherhood and she

would not allow herself to be a woman instead, she thinks like a man. The only way to think like a woman is to be stupid. In the world view of the novel, men are happy and comfortable to see women as victims, prey to be used and discarded. In the character of Adaku, she debunks this myth. Nwakusor and Ubani take sides with Nnu Ego against Adaku this is because she does not have a male child as a result, Nnu Ego's position as the senior wife of Amataokwu was reversed just because the new wife had given birth to a male child.

Equally, girls are socialized to believe that they are inferior and could be dispensed with. 'The boys can help too grumped Taiwo, the other twin... They have to go to their lesson, Taiwo and stop moaning. You are a girl: you know' (1979:67). In another instance, Nnu Ego rebuked the girls. But you are girls they are boys. You have to sell to put them in a good position in life... (1979:178). Also, when asked about her daughters and school Nnu Ego said, "that they only attended for a couple of years and that they have Adim and Nnamdio to think of and with Oshia's big school fees," they cannot afford fees for the twin stressing that they will be married in a few years.

At the height of the tradition Nnu Ego's self realisation, she comes to appreciate the importance of women education and regretted that she did not have enough money to let the girls stay at school. Also, at this point, she confesses that she is beginning to think that there may be a future for educated women, adding that she saw many young women teaching in schools. It is in the wake of this realisation that education is the key to success and power, and that women could be empowered with it.

In *Second Class Citizens*, the predicament of being a girl child is also portrayed. It begins with a girl who sees herself reflected in the eyes of the surrounding society as having little value or worth. On the first very page, we learn that,

Ada was a girl who has arrived when everyone was expecting a boy. So, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was so insignificant (1974:7).

Since Ada was just a girl, it seems unwise to educate her. Her parents' failure to register her in school was because as a girl, she would soon, grow and get married. The girl-child is made to believe that she is inferior to the boy. Right from childhood, a girl is constantly reminded that she is a girl and therefore is a second human (inferior). When Ada's father finally died, Boy her younger brother was enrolled into a rich school while Ada was enrolled into a poor one. Emecheta stressed this point of inequality of opportunity between the sexes and the conscious rationalised efforts to subsume the female for the upliftment of the male as the heir. Ada in her thought believe that her experiences with her Ma (mother) so early in life made her nervous and sapped her of her self confidence. She is unsophisticated as a girl but she is intelligent and rebellious. Through her slow, painful but persistent progress, she grows from unwanted child to self affirming adult. During this trying periods for Ada, she decides to be "as cunning as a serpent but harmless as a dove' (1974:30). "Ada trained herself. She learnt very early to let her common sense guide her. She has the makings of a woman who would think before she acts. Very few women can do that". (1974:31). Ada uses this tactics when she is frustrated in her plans to travel abroad and also when she is denied educational opportunities. Emecheta is saying that even in face of an oppressive system of deep-rooted norms, practices and beliefs in female subordination. A woman must strive and assert herself. The author makes Ada succeed. In this quest for self assertion, an

aggrieved female need shed no tears but must work out a strategy for survival and recognition.

In the fictional world, wives are not allowed to contribute in decision making on important issues. Even if it was about their own lives, the decision has to be referred to the parents - in-law and brothers to the husband. In Ada's case, although she is enlightened and she is also the main financial back bone of the family, she has to spend her salary but the discussion was in her absence which was very ridiculous. In Ada's imagination, (1974:29) she rationalizes: "She found all this ridiculous, the more so if the discussion involved finance. After all, she would have to pay for the plan in most cases but the decision would have been made behind her back".

In *Slave Girl*, Ogbanje Ojebeta is, unlike other female protagonists, a wanted girl child, the only surviving female child in a family of two sons. This cherished position with its lavish pampering is soon to give way to the extremity of domestic slavery. Because of her parents sudden death, Okolie her brother, lacking money and means, sells her to slavery to Ma Palagada.

2. Theme of women/girls as chattels of trade and property for sale

The Slave Girl depicts the economic value of women as analogues to chattels of trade and property for sale. Thus, a girl's worth as human being is reduced to the economic level. Okolie, Ogbanje's brother, lacking money, sells her sister to Ma Palagada for eight pounds. Ma Palagada thus supplies money he direly needs to equip himself for their coming of age dance, as the chief dancer of the Uloko group. Ogbanje Ojebeta is later married to a man who pays her bride price and also pays off her owner, drawing attention to the parallel institution of slavery and marriage as Ojebata is simply transferred from one master to another.

The economic exploitation does not end in downright slavery. A girl's worth as human being is reduced to the sale ability of the girl and the income she fetches. This is attached in the bride price, in *Second Class Citizen*; Ada's bride price of five hundred pounds is never paid either, to charging of her family. The pride price is central to the marriage transaction. Thus, Okpo's people insisted on having nothing less than thirty pounds for their daughter's pride price. (1979:184).

In *Second Class Citizen*, Ada, who nurtures a dream of going abroad, works and saves up enough money for herself, her husband and children to travel. She find rather that she is to stay back in Nigeria saddled with the responsibilities of paying for Francis expences, looking after herself and her children, her parents in-law and paying for her sisters in-law's fees.

In the same light, in *Joys of Motherhood*, women are presented as commodities or property, which would be bought and also inherited. Nnaife wanted to go home to make Adankwo his wife in the normal traditional way. Adankwo belongs to him by right of inheritance (1979: 183). Women are shown as something to be exchanged or sold out just like cows and goats and this is a serious injury on their psych. Both inheritance and her sale as a commodity are undesirable aspects of the culture which Emecheta brought to the limelight for condemnation.

3. Theme of polygamous marriages

In *the Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta shows the effects of polygamous marriage in traditional African setting as it affects women. Nnu Ego was rejected by her first husband for failing to produce a child. Before Nnu Ego was born, Agbadi's wives were also jealous of Ona, Agbadi's mistress who gave birth to Nnu Ego. Agunwa's death was suspected to have been caused by her inability to bear the amusement that went on between Agbadi and Ona on the night that he had his way with her. Agunwa succumbs to tradition by dying of broken heart having witnessed her husband giving pleasure to another woman. Emecheta presents this as another way of using tradition to keep women subjugated.

4. Theme of societal conspiracy against womanhood

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta presents the conspiracy against womanhood. Women are saddled with the responsibility of taking care of their children even when their husbands are around. She provides the food from her husband's meager housekeeping money. Nnu Ego is faced with this burden in her marriage with Nnaife. Nnu Ego sells commodities such as cigarettes and fire wood during her husband's absence. After all her efforts in training her children, her male children did not remember her. The society blames her for her children's misbehavior which made her to become emotionally de-stabilised. She dies like a pauper on a road side.

Tradition makes it that women losses whether she conforms or rebel. According to Prof. Nnolim (2010: 102), he asserts that,

Motherhood which is the ideal reached after Nnuego in the *Joys of Motherhood* is no insurance or guarantee against unhappiness since that joy is a question mark because as Emecheta puts it: if you don't have children, the longing for them will kill you, and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you"... Nnuego laments: "God, when then will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being not anybody's appendage"

Nnuego condemns her co-wife, Adaku, as a prostitute for successfully making a clean break with marriage and establishing herself independently. In the character of Adaku, Buchi exposes the effectiveness and inner peace in Adaku's life when, she leaves to be a single woman. In the character of assertive Adaku, Emecheta portrays the image of one who rejects tradition and finds joy and peace in herself. Adaku left her home and survived with her girls. Emecheta presents Adaku as one who uses her initiative as a woman who is destined to survive. Emecheta tells us that Adaku later becomes very rich. She thought of sending her daughters to private lessons to learn the alphabets and that her stall at the market was stacked full with goods.

"By this portraiture, Emecheta presents a woman who has risen from cruel tradition in male oriented world designed to enslave women in sexist roles and curb every attempt at individuality" (Eko, 1986:216).

5. Theme of tyranny of patriarchy

Another significant theme which is the theme of tyranny of patriarchy is recounted in *Second Class Citizen*. This theme has to do with the idea of male dominance (patriarchy) in the traditional African society. This type of marriage system degrades and debases woman. She is seen and not be heard and an appendage to the man. Francis in

Second Class Citizen is depicted to be self centred, cruel, narrow - minded and in fact, downright venal. He brutalises Ada and deliberately tries to inject a feeling of inferiority in her. Certainly, Francis' conduct throughout the novel is depicted as grounded in patriarchal heritage. Francis is a typical uncaring husband to his wife even after she nearly died during child birth. He did not show any simple care to his wife. Francis constantly impregnates Ada. She had four children in a quick succession and finally, Francis turns into a wife beater. He does that constantly, and on a particular occasion, invites other tenants and landlord telling them that his wife has equipped herself with birth control gadget so that she would be free with other men. Pa Noble, the landlord makes Francis stop hitting Ada. Pa Noble, the landlord settled the case telling Francis that what his wife — Ada did was not wrong, just that she should have told him. Francis rationalizes that, "she could take other men behind his back, because how would he know that she was not going to do just that" (1974:160).

Francis sees a woman as a second human, to be slept with at anytime, even during the day, and if Ada refuses, he would beaten sense into her until she gives in; to be ordered out of bed after he is done with her; to make sure she washes his clothes and gets his meals ready, at the right time. To Francis, there is no need to have an intelligent conversation with his wife because, she might start getting ideas. Ada knew that she was a thorn in Francis' flesh. After that fight incident, Ada laments,

her marriage with Francis? It was finished as soon as Francis called in the Nobles and the other tenants. She told herself that she could not live with such a man. Now, everybody knew she was being knocked about, only a few weeks after she had come out of hospital (1974: 161).

Francis abuses Ada emotionally, psychologically, physically and otherwise. Ada bears them all. Francis reaches the peak of his abuse when he burns the manuscripts of Ada's Bride price which Ada pleads with him to read. Instead, Francis says,

You keep forgetting that you are a woman and you are black. The white man can barely tolerate us men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breast feed her baby (1974:184).

Francis' refusal to read Ada's manuscripts hurts her so much. He rather refers to it as. "Ada's rubbish" (1974:184). It was plain to Ada that Francis could never tolerate an intelligent woman. Francis burns the manuscripts of her Bride price. Ada laments, "Bill (one of her co-workers) called that story MY BRAIN CHILD ... that you could kill my child? Because that is what you have done" (1974:187). Francis does not care but that was the last straw to Ada. Ada finally abandons her tyrannical husband after he callously burnt the completed manuscripts of her first book—the Bride price. Making a defining moment in Ada's growing self awareness and confidence. In Emecheta's words in, "*African literature... in feminism with small f*" (2007:553,) "I have no sympathy for a woman who deserts her children, neither do I have sympathy for a woman who insists on staying in a marriage with a brute of a man, simply to be respectable" Emecheta concludes that, "if one educates a woman, one educates a community whereas if one educates a man, one educates one man". Finally, Ada takes her five children after

Francis' denial in the court of law that they were never married since he had burnt the marriage certificate and their children's birth certificate.

In *Double Yoke*, Emecheta explored feminism from another from another angle. Nko a female college student, whose personal relationship and educational goals are compromised by sexual politics on Nigeria campus. Nko is scorned by her boy friend for permitting premarital sex with him, and then seduced by a manipulative professor who later impregnates her. The title refers to Nko double bind - as she realises her equally degrading choice between prostitution as a traditional wife or as a liberated academic woman.

Nko breaks all the rules and social norms which tradition places on the female:

1. You must be chaste and Nko failed on that score.
2. You must be faithful to your betrothed and Nko fails there in her affair with elder professor Ikot and\You must not bear children outside marriage. Nko expects a baby for the professor and decides to keep it. Emecheta shows that though Nko may fail on all three counts, she succeeds as an individual who knows what she wants and set about it the way she knows how. She wants to succeed in life and as a woman desirable in her own right and as a qualified educated woman, financially capable of looking after her aspirations. What actually does she have left? She has successfully violated all these social norms and respectability. Is she still a woman? Can she ever be married by any man? The true reason of marriage emerges — love and companionship. The sudden death of her father and Nko's helpless despair brought Nko and her boyfriend, who are in love but who are kept apart by social prejudices implanted in them since birth. All the do's and don'ts in male and female behaviour prove superficial and unable to stand the test and rigours of modern society. It is the individual who counts. The individual must satisfy himself/herself and then the society.

In many phallogocentric societies of which Nigeria is a part, women have had to pay the price for her independence.

In the final words of Alice Rossi,

A woman graduate student who showed strong commitment and independence is characterised as “an unfeminine bitch” and others who are quiet and unassertive were referred to as lacking in ambition, women who will never amount to much (1970:62-3).

The image of women as people who will “never amount to anything” has been a dominant image graphically painted in many Buchi Emecheta's works particularly in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *The Slave Girl* (1977). One finds in these two novels cited ‘the traditional African woman, in the persons of Nnuego in *the Joys of Motherhood* and Ogbanje Ojebeta in *The Slave Girl* who are two dumb because they have no ambition to improve their lot. They accept to live in abject servitude, receiving very little from their husbands in terms of love, affection and financial support and sadly enough, desiring far less for them in terms of acquiring some education with which to change their destinies. Such women are as old history. But their image should be replaced with that of modern women who are strong, sensible, assertive and independent enough to take bold steps towards their survival in ‘a sea like world’ dominated by (males) sharks ready

to prey on vulnerable (female) porpoises. Such women are also very well educated such as Ada and Nko in *The Second Class Citizen* and in *Double Yoke* respectively. Also, Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood* exhibited these traits above.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there is a need to re-evaluate and re-define gender roles in the African society in order to establish mutual complementarities between men and women. This study has examined the extent of marginalisation of the African women in a sexist society which relegates womanhood to gender roles. Buchi Emecheta gives voice to the women as she tries to assert herself. She uses every page of her novels *The Second Class Citizen*, *The Slave Girl*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *The Double Yoke* to show us all the ways of using tradition to keep women in a subjugated position. Simeon De Beauvoire once remarked that, 'you are not born a woman, you become one' (sign 715). Furthermore, the traditional practice of equating womanhood to motherhood is also criticised by Emecheta. The voice of Buchi Emecheta is sometimes quiet and dignified but at times, depicts authority that comes with the mastery of her subject matter. It is discovered for instance, that the persistent inequality between men and women in her works is as a result of culturally imposed social values. This inequality in her works has contributed to the general disempowerment of women. Buchi Emecheta however, projects womanhood in a positive light. She also upholds female potentialities which the patriarchal structure has repressed. As a feminist, she tells the story of the woman from the woman's perspective, apparently with a view of countering the seeming marginalisation of her sex. She awakens in the reader, the imbalance of power in the gender group. This study has further discovered that illiteracy among women has affected noticeably, the quality of life that female child experiences. Buchi Emecheta has therefore presented education as the most essential weapon for challenging one aspect of gender inequality which is the educational disempowerment of the woman. Violence against women is wide spread in many African cultures. The study also examined the psychological, mental and physical abuse and their negative effect on their well being.

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