

# **Ambivalence: Buchi Emecheta's rugged road towards female self-actualisation in *Head Above Water***

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## **Introduction**

This paper advances the argument that, although Emecheta- similar to the mode of the African American Fugitive Slave Narrative genre - employs the typical liberatory trope structuring her autobiography *Head Above Water* (1986) in such a way that it presents an evolving female self destined for both physical and mental freedom, its telling is fraught with a number of contradictions that cast some doubt on the ultimate attainability of such a free self. Among those pioneer African female writers essentially departing from the premise that "women did not hear of culture for the first time from men" such as Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba and others, Buchi Emecheta's 'feminist' stand seems to be the most ambivalent. It is worth pointing out even at this stage that Emecheta's own conception of the scope of her work is not that clear-cut. For instance, how *re*-presentative of African women experiences are the kind of presentations that Emecheta makes in her writings as is generally claimed in adulatory feminist scholarship on her? What picture of parenthood (both biological and intellectual) does one get when reading her autobiography? What are her views about African men and her fellow women across the divides of region, race and class with respect to the possibility of achieving the once much touted "Global or Universal Sisterhood" doctrine?

These are the issues this paper sets out to explore. I will do so in two major stages. The first stage (i) deals with the question of [self-] representation in which I look at Emecheta first (a) as a woman in Igbo society and how that relates to other African societies that I know of; and, secondly, (b) specifically Buchi Emecheta and Sylvester Onwordi as wife and husband. The second stage (ii) looks at Emecheta first (a) as a mother - (divorced and, subsequently, a single parent) and (b) as a 'feminist' woman writer, and how she links these two i.e. biological motherhood and intellectual motherhood. I will not go into a

discussion of theories of autobiography like issues of subjectivity and revisionism as such.

## **The question of (self-) representation in *Head Above Water* and Emecheta's other writings.**

In her article "What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of Otherhood" Cynthia Ward brazenly asserts:

For literary critics seeking authentic representations of the African woman, the works of the Anglo-Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta provide a veritable gold mine...Here, at last, other commentators seem to agree, is a writer who speaks for the African woman: nearly every article on Emecheta's work invokes the 'voice' and 'perspective' of 'The African Woman.' Above all, her critics unanimously affirm, her novels represent the experience of the African woman struggling to assert herself against historically determined insignificance, a self constituted through the suffering of nearly every form of oppression – racial, sexual, colonial – that human society has created, a self that must find its true voice in order to speak not only for itself but for all others similarly oppressed...(Ward 1990:83)

Yet in any sphere of life the question of *representation* is already a perplexing one, in theories of ontology or subjectivity for instance (i.e. who can represent whom? Or, indeed, can anyone faithfully represent another when no two people share the same matrix of experiences? (see, for instance, an analysis of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Childs and Peters, 2001). In view of the foregoing debate then, and taking into proper account the possibility of "shared" experiences or "mutual affinities" as these are sometimes designated, and from the point of view of her own claim in her autobiography *Head Above Water* about her writing "on Africa and African women for the whole world" (Emecheta 1986: 446-7), how representative of African women's experiences are Buchi Emecheta's experiences as presented to us in this (and her other) text[s]?

In an interview with Oladipo Ogundele in 1994 Emecheta is on record to have said broadly that she writes about Africa for the world: "I write my books for the world to read. But at the moment and for a very long time, I have concentrated on the *African situation*. I was born in Nigeria and I grew up there. So, in most of my books I go back to Africa. *I write about Africa for the whole world* (in Umeh 1996: 446-7 my emphases). I find this position too wide ranging for any single author to adopt, perhaps explaining the inconsistencies that her pronouncements often engender. Indeed, in some cases she seems to hastily project her largely personal frustrations onto what she carelessly calls *Africa*. This is reflected in the ambivalence with which she approaches her life issues in general as this essay seeks to demonstrate.

For instance, in her 1986 essay "Feminism with a small letter 'f'", not being sure if she could be called a feminist or not she said: "I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of African women I know. I did not know that by doing so, I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with small 'f'" (cited by Umeh, 1996:xxx). And then elsewhere in her autobiography, talking about her uncertainty as to whether she should really take her life time dream to become a writer seriously (encouraged by a couple of documentary novels she had just read), she remarks: "I myself found such documentary novels not only interesting but very informative, too. So for the second time in my life I started consciously putting my thoughts onto paper...I noticed a difference with this type of writing. *I found it almost therapeutic. I put down all my woes. I must say that many a time I convinced myself that nobody was going to read them anyway, so I put down the whole truth, my own truths as I saw them*" (p.62 my emphasis). In a way it is this last pronouncement which is nearer the mark about some aspects of her writings than her other 'sweeping' statements about representing Africa to the world, even if some of those statements may contain some general truths as the case may be.

## **Emecheta writing as an Igbo woman**

As I have noted already, there is no doubt that Emecheta presents herself as a voiced woman making an attempt to speak not only for herself but also for those as yet not voiced women in society. In her essay 'Buchi Emecheta, Laughter and Silence: Changes in the Concepts of "Woman," "Wife," and "Mother"' Margaret Daymond explores Emecheta's progressive changes in the said concepts across the novels *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of*

*Motherhood*. Daymond notes that by the time of *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta has given new meaning to the traditional silence of women when the protagonist, Nnu Ego, uses 'chosen silence' as a weapon - a woman who 'is not silenced, but silent' (in Umeh 1996:279). While periodic shifts in one's approach towards life issues may be reflective of one's positive journeying on the road towards self-actualisation (a positive eschewing of bigotry or mental calcification/ossification) if any given stage reached is an amorphous muddle it may be reflective of mere mental drift likely to end up into some Sisyphus-like scenario. As this essay seeks to show, it is perhaps this too protean nature of her mission (which by the way in 1984 goes by the name 'ultrafeminism' and in 1988 is ironically feminism with a small letter 'f', etc. )<sup>1</sup> that makes Emecheta be seen to have no semblance of *terra firma* to step on as she journeys on her way towards what I think would be seen as a 'properly' integrated sense of wifehood, motherhood and a "healthy" feminist outlook. It would seem that, at every stage, the ground under her feet is already metres, if not miles, ahead of her step such that she perpetually finds herself out of tune.

Looking at some of the issues that Emecheta deals with in her writings - the general inferior social status of women, son preference, the institution of polygamy, etc. (all of what Marie Umeh collectively calls "Symbolic clitoridectomy")<sup>2</sup> I am in no doubt that so many other wo/men in Africa will find it easy to identify with her crusading. In this connection Cynthia Ward appositely points out that Emecheta's writings dramatize the African woman's struggle to "assert her self against historically determined insignificance"(Ward 1990:83). For instance, in the autobiography Emecheta bemoans "son preference" in her traditional society as seen first and foremost in the naming patterns. Her 'big' mother's name is Nwakwaluzo meaning "this child cleared the path" (Emecheta 1986:8)- for the smooth coming of a son, that is, "she was apparently expected to clear the path for some male children. ...It was almost like a command: she must have a male baby brother. I used to wonder sometimes what would have happened if, having given her such a name, her mother had had another baby girl instead of my father. Nonetheless, my father did come after her...and was given the name Nwabudike-'this child is a warrior'" (Emecheta 1986:8). Similarly, when Emecheta herself is born she does not only cause trouble for being born two months before time but she is a girl 'to boot!' Two things finally save her however: the fact that she is believed to be a come back spirit of her father's mother as seen in her determination to live which recalls her grandma's fighting spirit (Emecheta 1986:11-12) and also the fact that after her came her brother, Adolphus to finally consolidate the

marriage. This casts her as a relative being, her worth is measured only in relation to others and not in her own right. No wonder then that as she grows up she is still discriminated against where limited opportunities are concerned such as when the parents cannot afford to send both her and Adolphus to school preference is given to the latter because he is a boy (Emecheta 1986:13-14) - a common enough practice in most families in similar circumstances that I have personally come across.

However, even in such an overtly patriarchal society there is evidence in *Head Above Water* that it was still possible for women to occupy positions of influence. The most outstanding example of such women on whom young Emecheta models herself as writer of stories later in life is the same Nwakwaluzo who, ironically, became more of a warrior than Emecheta's father to whom the epithet warrior was given! Nwakwaluzo achieves for herself the title of Ogbueyin "the killer of elephants" as she led hunting parties and dealt in the ivory trade which brought her considerable wealth which she displays in trophies (Emecheta 1986: 8). Her huge success in a field classed as male perhaps goes to prove right the claim of some feminists when distinguishing between sex and gender when they point out that while sex is biological gender is a social construct: "gender difference ...is [merely] an elaborate system of male domination [and that] the theoretical task of feminism is to understand that system [while its] political task ...is to end it"(see Humm 1989: 84). It must be pointed out here that according to this gendering, like her granny's success at elephant hunting, by taking up writing Emecheta realises that she is challenging men at their self-appointed game and often imagines them thinking that she is encroaching into their domain as she remarks: "The world, especially the African world, still regards serious writing as a masculine preserve"(Emecheta 1986: 66)

Furthermore, there is evidence showing that Igbo women at large did devise ways of beating the patriarchal (and at some point the colonial) set up. In this connection commenting on Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo's essay "Tradition and the African Female Writer: The example of Buchi Emecheta" Marie Umeh points out: "Although Emecheta in her novels points to male oppression and social injustices against women, there is enough evidence, in those same novels, of rich and influential women, such as Ona in *The Joys of Motherhood* and Ma Palagada in *The Slave Girl*, who exploit and manipulate the existing

systems in their society to carve out a secure and healthy place for themselves”(in Umeh, 1996: xxxv-vi).Ezeigbo herself writes:

The socio-political institutions which women exploit to advantage in these novels are the age-group associations, the association of wives of a particular lineage and the solidarity that daughters, especially those married, enjoy in the natal family or extended family. In all of Emecheta's novels that are set entirely or partly in traditional society, the solidarity enjoyed by women in these groups or associations constitutes the mainstay of their survival, their control of their own affairs, and their influence on the men and on the community as a whole (pp 9-10).<sup>3</sup>

In the larger social context Ezeigbo mentions various socially sanctioned methods of women applying pressure on men among the Igbos: through women associations, going to sing bawdy songs at a man's house at night a practice called "sitting on a man," or refusing a man sex and food, etc. (in Umeh 1996: 20) -Take note in this connection that when Sylvester Onwordi burns the first manuscript of *The Bride Price* Emecheta applies the latter pressure on him in London (Emecheta 1986: 34). Ezeigbo concludes: "Indeed for women in traditional society, survival is the keystone of their life's experience in the patriarchy" (Ezeigbo 1996:15). Marie Umeh notes the apogee of this fighting spirit among Nigerian women as reflected in their war against colonial taxation and speculates on how in turn that spirit is reflected in Emecheta's writing: "The Aba Women's War of 1929 was an historical reality that must have fed Emecheta's imagination. Her female militants, Debbie, Ogedemgbe and Adah, are good fighters and survivors. Unfortunately, it was after this powerful rebellion by Igbo women against British taxation of their properties that the colonial administration banned traditional political associations by declaring them illegal"(Umeh 1996: xxxi-ii). Van Allen points out the effects of this action on the women in general: "This action [by the British] made 'sitting on' anyone illegal, thereby depriving women of one of their best weapons to protect wives from husbands, markets from rowdies, or coco yams from cows (Umeh 1996: xxxii.). There is a further explanation to British action in this regard (which smacks of colonial patriarchy) as Umeh (1996:xxxii) points out: "While the British removed legitimacy from women's traditional political institutions,

they did nothing to help Igbo women move into modern official establishments. *Passive, Christian wives and mothers, not Amazons, is what they had in mind for African women*" (my emphasis). This should explain a fact we will discuss later why at some point in the autobiography Miss Humble, one of young Emecheta's British teachers deems as out of the way Buchi's wish to become a writer (pp. 23-4).

## **Emecheta as Sylvester Onwordi's wife and her apparent "male-phobic" attitude**

As we have noted about the Igbo society above in various other societies women have their own ways of counteracting their common gendered subaltern position. However, in this section I wish to point out that there seems to be a few specific things about Emecheta's marriage to Sylvester which hardly make her case representative either of Igbo society or that of the larger Africa she claims to be writing about. And this failed marriage, it must be said, seems to have so badly poisoned Emecheta's view of men in general as to render her almost "psychotic" where her relations with the latter are concerned. Very early in the text Emecheta portrays Sylvester as a weak-minded man plagued by an inferiority complex of sorts: "I stayed at school until I was sixteen; then I could no longer avoid family pressures. I refused all the men kept for me and married the man I called Francis in my other books, but whose real name is Sylvester Onwordi - a dreamy, handsome local boy...But I soon found out that under his handsome and strong physique was a dangerously weak mind. It did not take me long to realise my mistake..." (pp.27-28). Having made this painful discovery on a personal level (between the two of them) it would seem that Emecheta is too eager to project this image not only onto all Nigerian men but all *black African* men. In an interview with Oladipo Ogundele Emecheta mentions that Nigerian men are weak:

"Our men don't realise that they are weak because they hide behind the women...By so doing, their weaknesses don't show in real life *until you put them down on paper* then they become visible. When you see these characters *in black and white* you will realise that our men need to re-educate themselves or re-examine their actions because it is overflowing from individual families to our government. You can see their weaknesses in the way they run our government. The funniest thing about it is that *every body* is talking about it and there is

nothing they can do to change it" (Umeh, 1996: 453 emphases mine).

These are superficial and, rather overdrawn, generalisations. It is easy to see that she is simply projecting Sylvester's supposed weakness onto all Nigerian males which is a most unfortunate thing for her to do - to say the least. And how does she ultimately prove African men's weakness? She talks of her putting them down '*on paper*' and in '*black and white*.' That I think is where her problem lies. It is exactly because she is absolutist, and hence 'simplistic,' in her analysis (as she tries to see them in 'black and white') that she misses the point. Very few things if any at all could be said to fit into the "black and white" categorisation. Besides she overlooks the possibility of her own subjectivity when she 'puts them down on paper'.<sup>4</sup> It must be noted that African men like their counterparts in most parts of the world have tended to see themselves as providers for the family except that, unlike Victorian England, most African men see their women as co-providers. In this connection Ama Ata Aidoo and Zulu Sofola maintain, perhaps controversially to some, that the hierarchised subjection of women in African societies was a colonial introduction and legacy. Sofola, for instance, says: "With European exposure the African educated person has been led to believe that the female is an afterthought, a wall-flower...[Yet] [t]here was no area of human endeavour in the traditional system where the woman did not have a role to play. She was very strong and active...In the European system there is absolutely no place for the woman." (qtd in Innes 1997: 205-6),<sup>5</sup> But, as I should think is the case with any other peoples anywhere, you also get the 'lazy' and 'disorganised' types of men and it would *seem* that Sylvester is that type of a man hence Emecheta's peculiar situation.

Why *seem*? I am sceptical about looking at Emecheta as a total victim of male chauvinism or wrong choice. There is reason to speculate that Emecheta herself may have been to blame in some ways. At least two issues could be singled out: First, it would seem that she made a big deal of her receiving more money than Sylvester and second she seems to be too eager to receive praise for her success perhaps even demanding it *as of right* the latter trait which often is a characteristic either of snobs or those who have little self-confidence and are always looking for externally enforced affirmation from others to know their personal worth. For instance, to substantiate my first charge Emecheta mentions that she had a 'classy job' and adds "I was earning almost six times my husband's salary. Consequently it was easy for me to save and bring us all to England"(p.28). Now that is a problematic statement. As I will show it makes



one suspect that she may have made too much of this fact at Sylvester's expense. Later she attributes what she regards as his inferiority complex to the fact that he was without employment (p.33). But take note that even when he does get such employment his conduct towards her does not change that much which to me points to a bigger problem than Emecheta wants us to see (pp.95-96).

One gets the suspicion that it may not just be about a natural inferiority complex in Sylvester but it is as though right from the time she gets a job with the American embassy in Lagos she was determined to set up some competition between herself and her husband. And it is common knowledge that the moment earning power comes into the centre of the equation in the running of relationships things are bound to go awry. It is a known fact that men have used their often superior earning power to subjugate women with unpleasant consequences and I should think that the reverse (as is the case with Emecheta and Onwordi) should be even more volatile given that men have traditionally mistakenly regarded themselves as the main bread winners. Therefore a possible tug-of-war for power cannot be ruled out entirely here. As such it could be said that Sylvester's 'unusual' actions were a way of holding his own ground through the eliciting of what could be called 'negative attention' from her i.e. as a form of power brokering (which of course is no solution either hence the negative consequences for both of them).

In this connection take note that Emecheta herself dramatises such a case in her 1994 novel *Kehinde*. Analysing some aspects of Emecheta's protagonist in this novel in her essay "To Ground The Wandering Muse: A Critique of Buchi Emecheta's Feminism" Pauline Ada Uwakweh notes:

As a professional worker in a bank, Kehinde earns more than her husband, Albert. Her position in the bank had enabled them to get a mortgage for their house. Her financial advantage over her husband, therefore, entitles her to the legal ownership of their house. On one hand, Emecheta presents Kehinde as 'traditional,' since by Nigerian standards 'a good wife was not supposed to remind her husband of such things. When Kehinde said 'your house,' she was playing the role of the good Nigerian woman (*Kehinde*, 4.qtd in Umeh, 1996:397).

But note that Albert instead says "our house" so as not to upset Kehinde. On the other hand, she underlines the fact that this is a "game" that husband and wife play without thinking after sixteen years of marriage (Umeh 1996:397-8). It is clear from the above set up that according to Kehinde (perhaps one of Emecheta's several alters) the material aspect of this relationship is taking precedence over everything else and since she is more advantaged in that aspect she decides to use it to humiliate her partner, a situation which neither women expect from men nor men from women. As such Sylvester's (here Albert) attitude towards Buchi may actually have been to do with different systems of ownership of property between husband and wife. Sylvester may have been for a more "egalitarian" approach while Emecheta for a ruggedly individualist one a position that Sylvester may have found demeaning of him. And different people react differently to challenges to their persons: they either accommodate their demeaned status and act accordingly or they may protest passively and negatively, or actively or using any combination of these. Sylvester seems to have combined passivity and negativity a possibility which perhaps renders Emecheta's analysis of his conduct rather superficial. In this connection note that Emecheta herself points out the existence of two 'Sylvesters' when she says of him; "Sylvester was a very intelligent person who gloried in the fact that he could pretend to be unintelligent whenever he wanted to" (Emecheta 1986:93).

In the same connection one, could argue that even Onwordi's burning of the first manuscript of *The Bride Price*, brutal as it was in itself, could have various explanations.<sup>6</sup> Two different explanations are advanced for the burning of the manuscript. Emecheta herself gives the reason that Onwordi felt threatened by her rising success: " She told Francis about *The Bride Price* in the evening. Francis laughed, 'Whatever was he going to hear next? A woman writer in his own house, in a white man's country?' (qtd in Umeh 1996: xiv ) It may be important to note that by the time Emecheta brings the manuscript to Onwordi their relationship is already strained as such his initial unwillingness to read the manuscript may be a protest at what may have gone before could have interpreted it as another of those Emecheta jibes and so his reaction could have been yet another example of power brokering-certainly not a positive way of course. Furthermore, and more tellingly too, it will be recalled that Sylvester did not pay the bride price for Buchi until much much later (p.92) and although their eloping was by mutual agreement with Emecheta with the new problems in London he may have instinctively feared that the story was attacking his

family for defaulting on paying the bride price. Hence he may have merely been defensive by being dismissive - negative protest still (see Umeh 1996: xxvi). Culturally conscious and chauvinistic as Emecheta presents Sylvester to be, the issue of not having paid the bride price was certainly a sensitive one. This explains why later after his family has fulfilled that cultural obligation Onwordi claims what he regards as his position in the family with re-newed zest: "You'll never guess who has now become my full wife," He announced by way of greeting. ....My mother has paid your bride price. Your people asked and accepted more than five times the normal price and I think you should be pleased. Not many families are willing to pay that much on a woman. Not after the recent war at home, so you should be very pleased" (pp.992-93). It must be noted too that we don't get to hear Onwordi's side of the story from Onwordi himself as such you cannot rule out possible 'spin' on the part of Emecheta. Indeed, there may never be black and white situations out here.

In the end as Emecheta is trying to come to terms with her divorce she not only resorts to a sort of "sour grapes" syndrome by saying she did not need a man to have a happy home (which perhaps is a non-solution) but also she does not want to admit to the possibility of there having been something negative about herself that may have put her in a bad light where Onwordi or the other men she tries to date after her divorce (like Chidi) were concerned (an omission which smacks of self-righteousness on her part). Also take note that her solution indicates a "fetishization" or over-glorification of her profession which in Freudian terms could be seen as repression (and displacement ) rather than resolution : " As a child, I was brought up thinking that a happy home must be headed by a man... Now, suddenly, with more time on my hands to do exactly what I liked, that feeling was disappearing...A world of literary evenings-book launches, poetry readings...opened up....I became so busy that I kept wondering how it was that only a few years back I had felt that to be a full human being, I had to be a mother, a wife, a worker and a wonder-woman...." (pp.242-3). Her literary exploits have become a fetish standing in for that absent or even elusive man whom she deep down still desires to have in her home. By this stage Emecheta could rightly be said to have become a Faustian/Frankensteinian figure who has sold her soul to her literary exploits in a desperate attempt to fill a painful void in her life. For someone who had all along felt so strongly about marriage that position is perhaps not a very positive way of going about resolving her fix: the "either profession or marriage" approach. It would seem that it is her suspicions about men that stood in the way of any

meaningful contact with them. In other words, by this stage Emecheta seems to have developed a psychosis, a phobia, towards men. One positive thing that her experiences have on her, however, is that in her own way she is able to achieve some good measure of autonomy and self-assertion as a human being striving to shape her destiny, something which I personally think should be the goal not only of women but that of each and every human being (male or female) and which goal, given the human propensity towards tyranny, every opportunity needs to be seized to ensure its realisation.

### **The question of 'motherhood', single parenthood and Emecheta's feminism with small letter 'f.'**

It would be important to note from the outset that Emecheta's views of motherhood, like her views on representation, are very fluid reflecting influences from the fact of her being a single parent who also has to fend for the whole family single-handed, her unsure attachment to feminism with big letter 'F' and its conflict with the importance of children within Igbo tradition; and the whole question of First World/Third World feminist relationships.

### **Biological motherhood and its seeming confusion with single parenthood**

Emecheta's autobiography has two views of motherhood running parallel to each other namely biological motherhood and intellectual motherhood. Biologically she gives birth to five children within a time span of seven years (a fact which becomes contentious when she confronts her fellow women during an International Women's Year conference pp189ff). She is certainly passionate about biological motherhood. In spite of the trouble she has in bringing up these children she can still talk of the "beautiful moments of childbirth" (p.39) and she is content enough to have them around to enable her to proclaim: 'People who deliberately choose not to have children miss out on a great deal' (p.83). This is where Emecheta differs from her possible alter Kehinde who does not seem to care for children in a sentimental way at all.

However, Emecheta seems to be somewhat possessive and excessively self-interested where her children are concerned. For instance, she talks of the rewards of motherhood as a good funeral accorded one by one's children. This is when Chiedu walks out on her to her dad's (Emecheta's estranged husband) in protest over her education arrangements. She recalls Clive Allison's (a close friend of Emecheta's) mother's funeral "which to me was ideal, and [I]

imagine[d] from what my daughter did the worst death that could befall me”(p.239). It would seem that Emecheta wanted her children to feel obligated towards her for her bringing them about in a rather possessive way. It may be important to point out that sometimes children can feel “cooped up” in the home when parents overtly see them as either some form of investment for their future security or that they should feel perpetually grateful and obedient to them, an attitude which may stand in the way of the independence of the child leading to a sort of stunted psycho-social development.<sup>7</sup> And here, too, take note that she is saying the joys of *motherhood* and not the joys of *parenthood* which to me of course reflects not only her view of life as a single parent but perhaps also some good measure of possessiveness given that she wants Onwordi counted out of her social circle (largely on account of his theatrical disowning of them in the divorce scene). As such for Chiedu to go to him is seen as a huge loss and betrayal to her, unforgivable ingratitude too. Also, for some strange reason, note that in the autobiography Emecheta’s view of parenthood is that of single parenthood by the female. Commenting on the value of doing more school work at home with children she proposes: “women should try it more with their own children during school holidays”(p.176) - why *women* and not *parents*? And when talking about her own experiences with job hunting she declares: women in particular would like work that fits into their child rearing routine (p.77). Why this exclusive focus on women?

## **Intellectual motherhood and a problematic “feminism”**

Emecheta regards each one of her publications as a child, a ‘brain child’ (p.34) thus setting a case for intellectual motherhood. However, even her view of intellectual motherhood is no less ambiguous. She proudly relates her fight against Miss Humble’s ill-advised colonial ploy to prevent her from pursuing her dream of becoming a writer (p.34). Miss Humble’s objection to young Emecheta’s dream is in line with the image of the “passive Christian wife” the British wished to make of the colonised women when they came to “teach... girls to value their own importance” (p.18) - as Emecheta puts it when talking of her missionary teachers at the Methodist High School. Certainly Miss Humble herself knew of female Euro-American writers and she herself was engaged in employment not only outside the home but out in the colony too. Therefore her reaction to young Emecheta’s dreams cannot be anything but colonial. Emecheta’s rejection of the voice of authority strikes Ezenwa-Ohaeto as interesting:

The debate illuminates the moral dimensions of that incident as well as the symbolic nature of the protagonist's refusal to be humiliated while harbouring an innocent perception of her future. Its symbolic effects are also related to the erroneous association of academic authority with moral authority, which is what generates the protest element in Buchi Emecheta's reaction. Moreover, the conscious establishment of this protest at the level of an impressionable secondary school stage in a colonial society requires a strength of character not common, and it is that consciousness which positively transforms the later life of the protagonist. Thus its symbolic projection is that there is need to develop an attitude that engages authority in an interrogatory appraisal in spite of the ostensible importance of their secular roles (in Umeh 1996: 352-353).

And this is something Emecheta does again and again with various forms of authority including patriarchy, her far too intrusive publishers, etc. In the same vein earlier Emecheta herself laughs at her mother's gendered admonitions when she says her daughter "thinks too much for a woman" (p.4). Yet she herself finds it rather difficult to reconcile high levels of intellectual abstraction with motherhood or womanhood in general. When she is studying for her first degree in Sociology, at some point her statistics lecturer takes a day off to attend to her sister who is having a baby at a hospital. Emecheta expresses surprise at the possibility that her lecturer could also be a person with 'maternal' affection. She says: "...connecting this young female with a sister who could have a baby was beyond my imagination. Maybe she herself had held the baby. I saw her with a new eye. It reminded me what a bundle of contradictions women could be- that from the same head could erupt thoughts of maternal love, and the abstract concepts of highly applied mathematics"(p.130). This is an ambivalent feminist stance; there is absolutely no justification for her to feel this way about women at all when she herself defied Miss Humble's narrow conception of the supposed inferior intellect of the African woman. It is because she does not seem to have resolved her quandary over whether a professional woman can also be a wife and mother, a piece of ambivalence reflected in her own fetishization of her profession after her divorce as we noted earlier.

The above incidents point to at least two important issues: Emecheta's unsure position when she actually sets about living her dream as a writer and her ambiguous relationship with the general feminist ideology. The various forms

of opposition to and envy for her career from various peoples only make matters worse even as she finally successfully manages to hold her ground. In this regard Emecheta tells us of one such vehement opposers (especially after she has already decided to give it a go) who is none other than Sylvester Onwordi himself. As Ezenwa-Ohaeto observes

In a bid to show part of her individuality, she writes a novel *The Bride Price*. Unfortunately Sylvester after reading the book burns it and it is this act that leads to a breakdown of the marriage. It was a terrible act and the destruction of her manuscript parallels the destruction of an "offspring," for Emecheta regards the work as her "brain child" Thus that unnecessary but wilful act is an equivalent of murder since the creation of a work of art is like the production of a baby, absorbing the energies, thoughts, and parts of the life of the writer (in Umeh 1996:354).

Not recognising her intellectual offspring (so it seems to Emecheta) it is not surprising to her therefore that later Onwordi disowns his own biological children (p.36). As such Emecheta's position as an independent-minded female intellectual is extremely difficult to establish because she half fears what the males think of her: "female authors are viewed with suspicion...the world, especially the African world, still regards serious writing as a masculine preserve" (p.66). No wonder to her also then that even though she expects encouragement from someone male she thinks she will not get such encouragement from any of her male friends, not even those she tries to date, hence her complaint: "Where do those gorgeous women get their men friends who encourage them to greater heights from? (p.69)<sup>8</sup> which ironically also shows a lack of a recognition of her full personhood in her at this stage.

But, then, even as Emecheta is fighting for gender equality she still has not overcome the gendered sense of wo/man's sphere in some matters. Asserting herself as an independent-minded woman herself she says she despises those women who look up to their husbands and yet she gives the impression that some tasks are for men and others for women and only asks the men to respect those female tasks too: "I would rather have a marriage in which we would be companions and friends, a marriage in which neither role, least of all the

kitchen one was looked down upon”(p.102). This, I think, is largely due to her ambivalent position on what sort of feminist she would like to see herself as. Indeed talking about how she suddenly discovered that her writing was classed feminist even when she did not know about feminism Emecheta said: “1975 was International Woman’s Year. I had never heard the word ‘feminism’ before then. I was writing my books from the experiences of my own life and from watching and studying the lives of those around me in general. I did not know that writing the way I was , was putting me into a special [feminist] category. I had the first inkling of it on 28 June 1975 when the International Women’s League invited me to give a speech...” (p.189). But she is still unsure of the tag “feminist” and so in a 1984 interview she points out : “ My novels are not feminist; they are part of the corpus of African literature” (qtd by Umeh, 369). Yet back then she belonged to the avant-garde of women advocating for African women to be ultra-feminist as we noted earlier. But by 1988 she still feels a bit uncomfortable about the tag “feminist” with regard to her own work and declares: “I write about the little happenings of everyday life...I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am a feminist with a small ‘f’” (in Umeh, 369)

Unsure as Emecheta is she also notices that for various reasons ranging from race, class or sheer envy not all women are supportive of one another in their liberation rendering the call for universal or global sisterhood problematic. To begin with, at the Africa Centre during the International League convention she takes a swipe at what she regards as First World feminists’ patronising attitudes towards Third World women a charge which in the context of the issues raised (birth control) sounds rather flimsy.<sup>9</sup> She does acknowledge this herself when she says: “Before I spoke, the general talk was drifting to women emancipation, birth control in the Third World, and how the Third World women were suffering. I don’t know why I hated people talking about us like that. I still hate it, and because of this I find myself disagreeing on everything suggested by white women, even though I know that some of those suggestions could be quite relevant. I think ...one simply becomes fed up with seeing oneself as a problem” (Emecheta 1986: 189-190).<sup>10</sup> [Perhaps in repentance of such uncalled for outrage she herself later, in *Joys of motherhood*, points out the pointlessness of having so many children by confessing that “the subject of her *Joys of Motherhood* is ‘population control. Having so many children does not make you a better human being. Nnu Ego’s children left her to go to different



places to study. It does not mean that they did not love her. What the Western type of civilisation demanded was not the type of civilisation demanded earlier on" (Umeh 453.) It would seem that at this stage she is perhaps learning to let go of her seeming possessiveness]. She is also critical of some aspects of First World representation though especially what she calls 'sensationalistic' and 'insensitive' presentations on cliteriodectomy in Africa. In an interview with Oladipo Ogundele she takes Alice Walker head on for what she regards as an aspect of such misrepresentation and disrespect for Africa's elderly women in her writings in general: "I personally don't welcome her intervention and there is a group of us who are very angry about it...She parades herself all over talking down on African old women and reducing us to nothing. You know we respect our old women. She talked down to them and that is unforgivable..." (Umeh 1996:455). Another largely unwarranted stance there since female clitoridectomy is still a prevalent symbol, a brutal one too, of female oppression on this continent.

Dr. Harriet Sibisi's charge against First World women's exclusive and narrow focus on birth control and the suffering of African women under the yoke of patriarchy at the same conference, however, viewed in a slightly different light does seem to make sense: her argument runs something like 'fight all battles.' That is if First World women are truly concerned about the plight of women in the Third World then they must first engage their own peoples, their governments, their trade and financial institutions in their countries and some such bodies and individuals to stop their genocidal policies against the peoples of the Third World because these lead to the further oppression of the Third World women they are trying to help free from patriarchy. All these issues touch on what Katherine Frank calls an internal contradiction of African feminism: "the very notion of a liberated African woman is a contradiction in terms. The issues of the *irremediable antagonism* between the African woman's identity as an African and as a woman( qtd in Ward 1990: 84). The troubled question has been: what comes first between the fight against imperialism on the international scene and the fight against male chauvinism at home? According to Marie Umeh while both fights are important at this stage top priority must be given to the gender fight: "There can be no question that the "politics of gender" has to cease in order for the collective struggle against the real enemies-social injustice and human degradation-to take place around the world (Umeh 1996: xxxiii-iv). I beg to differ with her on this point and suggest

that both struggles require equal attention from all those interested simultaneously.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, with respect to problems of global or universal sisterhood, apart from Miss Humble and Emecheta's mother who try to stand in the way of the would-be writer and the First World feminists whom she sees in some respects as enemies of Third World women, several other women come in as Emecheta's opponents in one way or another rendering universal sisterhood difficult. For instance, when she first arrives in London, the Onwordi's first landlord and landlady harshly evict them from their lodgings because, as Emecheta suspects, being childless themselves they are envious of young Buchi with her 'troop' of children (p.31). As she is about to give birth to her fifth child the social service workers she goes to refer her case to fail or, rather, refuse to understand her situation when she feels that labour is about to set on - and to imagine that they were her fellow women!

Class and perhaps race is yet another barrier. There is the case of her 'friend' Phyllis Long who disliked the fact that she lived in the same high class area as Emecheta (p.103). She also has an issue to pick with those who are advising her that she retry matrimony which she later realises is deliberately ill-advice: Later her female friends are keen to have her re-enter the life of matrimony which Emecheta suspects is advice given out of envy to injure her: "The few women friends I had at the time kept telling me what I did not want to hear. They were so keen on my re-entering into matrimony again that I became suspicious. They could not have been enjoying themselves that much, and I later realised that the facts that I got myself published and was reading for a degree were too much for some of my female friends"(p.96). Much as this could have been true, yet, Emecheta's successes taken proper account of, still one gets the feeling that she could be seen as a snob as from time to time she looks at herself as a sort of 'superwoman.'

However, Emecheta does achieve some good measure of cordial relations with her fellow students when she is reading for her undergraduate degree in Sociology-they divide up which areas whom will work on and share their research findings. This seems to reflect the sense of togetherness she experiences at the Pussy Cat Mansions where, as Christine Sizemore (in Umeh 1996:3-73) observes in her article "The London Novels of Buchi Emecheta," "Adah [Emecheta's another alter ego] finds that the problems of poverty bring women together and create an interracial community...[and] she takes the

opportunity to analyse this condition in her novel *In The Ditch* in which she combines British feminist analysis of the oppression of women with African values of women working together to form a community". There is so much human goodness at Pussy Cat such that even after Ada moves to a flat near Regent's Park "she still goes to 'the Crescent' near her old neighbourhood to shop" (in Umeh 1996:373). But of course that may very well be painting a picture which is "too good" to be true as each and every society has its own problems of human relationships.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has explored how Buchi Emecheta presents herself as Wife, Mother and Writer in her autobiography *Head Above Water* principally and her other writings and pronouncements in general. Through the exploration of Emecheta as an Igbo woman and as Sylvester Onwordi's wife I have explored the extent to which the experiences she relates in her works could not entirely be said to be representative of the experience of the "African woman" as both she and Cynthia Ward maintain. And through an exploration of Emecheta as mother/writer I have sought to demonstrate how her experiences as a divorced woman and, subsequently as a single parent, affect the kind of views she propagates (which I have identified as ambiguous mostly) relating to biological motherhood especially and her brand of 'feminism' in general. As we have noted Emecheta's perspective on her feminist mission is highly oscillatory. It is not any single thing, it would seem that it cannot be distilled into any coherent system of thought. She generates a sizeable amount of controversy along the way in which she herself, controversially, gets caught up. Also what came in for scrutiny was the quest for universal sisterhood a project that for Emecheta, as for any utopian, is still highly problematic. All in all, by the end of the autobiography Emecheta does achieve some measure of autonomy - a problematic autonomy though, it has transpired, hence the ambivalence.

## Notes

1. In her article Margaret Daymond quotes an interview Emecheta had with Itala Vivan published in 1984 in which Emecheta points out the need for African feminists to be ultrafeminist (Umeh 1996: 287). Now one would expect that with that she is quite a radical feminist herself. Yet in an essay which she wrote in 1986 she seems to have toned down quite significantly when she says if she is a feminist then she is a feminist with a small 'f' (Umeh 1996: 369). But in the autobiography which was published in the same year she seems to oscillate between mild and ultra feminism the latter especially when she declares that a household does not necessarily need a man (p.242). And in her 1994 novel *Kehinde* she comes up with such an ultrafeminist protagonist Kehinde. I am not sure what her position now is, but with all this information no new position would surprise or shock me.
2. Umeh makes a very important point regarding symbolic clitoridectomy when she describes it as: The effacement of women through cultural norms such as polygamy, son preference, and wife [widow?] inheritance occurring daily in African women's lives and is recorded in their oral and written literature (Umeh 1996:xxiv). In Malawi we have such women's traditions as the pounding song where women vent out their frustrations against their husbands, mothers-in-law etc. This is common among all the tribes both patrilineal and matrilineal. But among some matrilineal tribes, which are also largely uxorilocal (where the man goes to live in the village of the wife), the men too have their own institutions such as Nyau-a mask dancing tradition among the Chewa-through which the men vent out their anger at their women and especially their often demanding and troublesome mothers-in-law using the most bawdy language under the guise of the mask. It is therefore important to take into account the fact that it is not only women who are victims of oppressive cultural practices but men as well. Most of these matrilineal societies tend to have female chiefs too except that even if that is the case you still have the uncle figure lurking somewhere. So a man can have a lot of influence at his sister's village as advisor while he may be a virtual slave at his wife's village as son-in-law.
3. Umeh points out the revival in recent times of the efforts by women to keep up the spirit of protest through groupings such as WIN(Women in Nigeria) 1982 and Better Life Programme formed by Mrs Babangida etc. She notes further though that they are largely impotent to effect much

- change (Umeh 1996: xxxiii-xxxiv). It would seem that after the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa in 1995 the men have resorted to employing women to continue the battle with some good measure of success. Recently a group of half-naked women rowing boats up the river Niger themselves waged a successful battle against Shell Oil Company in the Niger Delta taking over one of the company's premises demanding special benefits for the damage these companies are causing to their immediate environment ([www.allafrica.com](http://www.allafrica.com) Sept. 2002).
4. Margaret Busby points out that 'at a Rwanda benefit evening hosted by black writers in London, in September 1995 Emecheta suggested that the way to address the ailments of many African nations would be to put women in positions of power' (Umeh, 1996: xvi) Yet one of the alleged chief culprits in the genocide and who is currently on trial was a former Hutu female minister for Family and Women's affairs, Pauline Nyiramasumuko (and take good note of her portfolio) who it is alleged used to encourage Hutu men to rape Tutsi women! ([www.allafrica.com](http://www.allafrica.com)- July 2002) Furthermore did Emecheta and her friends stop to analyse some of the possible historical causes of the Rwanda genocide before offering women as the only leaders who can handle it? We can no longer afford such simplistic and narrow-minded solutions, or we are only risking running away from one problem and falling into another, equally crippling, problem. For my part of the solution is to have both sides well represented. So I will always be critical of views that either seek to perpetuate stereotypes that deliberately put the black African peoples in a bad light or those that offer a simple way out of fixes.
  5. See Catherine Hall's "The History of the Housewife" (In Hall, Catherine. 1992. *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History*. Cambridge: Polity Press) in which she charts the emergence of not only the separate spheres doctrine but the virtual enslavement of women - especially from the upper classes -during in Victorian society in England). African societies do not seem to have ever been that rigid. Indeed in some matrilineal cultures in Malawi, some men find it very easy to move across some of these roles where necessary.
  6. About this incident I am not defending Onwordi at all as does Chikwenye Ogunyemi who accuses Emecheta of writing as Westerner, etc.(see Ward

1990: 68-69). All I am doing here is to try to suggest a possible alternative viewpoint to what Emecheta herself presents to explain the possible causes of Onwordi's conduct which I regard as negative protest.

7. There is something along those lines in the character Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's gothic novel of that title. It is wondered whether Alphonse and Caroline were indeed good parents to Frankenstein. Johana Smith doubts it. Emecheta seems to be like such a too nurturant parent who also demands gratitude for it.
8. It appears the effects of oppression can run so deep that overcoming them requires uncommomn effort. For instance, most women have always found it very difficult to break away from male domination feeling very hesitant to freely venture out and seize life on their own terms whether in writing or in the lived life out there.
9. Some argue that the problem is not about numbers and a lack of resources *per se* but the greed of some sections of society. I personally find such arguments generally lacking in substance –just wallowing in cold comfort - in the sense that there are proven health problems to women arising from too many pregnancies even where such women may be well off materially. Furthermore, I have always believed that for proper family development surely smaller numbers would do-it is easier to manage a smaller group of interests than a larger one which is why even in general management circles decentralisation is highly recommended. Above all even if greed were the sole problem as some like to console themselves -to me it both is and is not depending on what you apply the term to- then given that you have not yet dealt with that greed a more pragmatic approach would have to be the next best thing namely, have fewer children whom you can handle properly under the constraining circumstances rather than have a lot and make your lot even more miserable. Perhaps there is some middle ground to be struck between Nwakwaluzo's philosophy of not wanting to be extremely poor in people while extremely rich in wealth, on the one hand, and being extremely 'rich' in people while extremely poor in wealth, on the other (*Head*, p.9).
10. Take note that the youngsters at the 70s too see her as a black bourgeoisie who cannot represent their interest as they think she would not understand them an observation which points to the problems inherent in the issue of

representation. Spivak has a more sophisticated approach to the question when talking of the kind of representation as that carried out by Indian Subaltern Group. She particularly objects to their approach which seems to border on pure conjecture something which she also accuses First World critics of Third World literatures to be doing. However she does not rule out the possibility (if not also the need) of some forms of representation. In this connection Childs and Williams observe: "While Spivak cautions against 'giving a voice' to the subaltern, she is not against representation as such: a distinction [must be made] between 'making speak' and 'speaking about' (preferably after speaking with)...."(Childs 1997: 171). However, while one notices that even though Emecheta claims to be doing the same about African women she infuses too much of her own subjectivity such that she risks being seen as behaving like the Indian Subaltern Group. It would seem that an author like Ama Atta Aidoo seems to succeed better at concealing her personal subjectivities and speaking from the point of view of her fellows than does Emecheta. I think the latter sometimes trades in over-generalisations arising from her personal projections and also offers black and white, (hence simplistic) analyses and solutions to issues.

11. This is a problem that has plagued Third World feminism for quite sometime. In their essay "African Writing and Gender" C.L Innes and Caroline Rooney observe that early male African writing did not give a prominent place to female characters (Msiska, 1997: 194-98). It could be said that for male African writers at this time the question seemed to have been like the one Rahul Gairola quotes from Kristen Holt Petersen's essay "A Feminist Approach to African Literature" : which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism? (Gairola 2002:1) This question as Gairola notes in "(Dis)positions of Postcolonial Women" has led "most post[neo-]colonial feminists to question the relationship between the woman and the post[neo-]colonial, one subaltern with another."(Gairola 2002:1) The Indian Subaltern Studies Group themselves put it as follows: '...the term [subaltern] is used as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.'(in Childs 1997:161) In an example that expresses in the same breath both the racialised subaltern of the colonized in general and the gendered subaltern specifically, Rahul Gairola makes mention of Thomas Macauley's call to

create “a race of brown-skinned Englishmen” in his “Minute on Indian Education” which “insult though it was to Indian men, allocate even less agency to the role of Indian women in the discourse of British colonial culture.”(Gairola 2002:1) In this connection, limiting herself to the broad African landscape, Aidoo contends that the displacement of African women from the centre of activity was engendered by the same colonialism which worlded a subaltern position to the colonized world and has remained so ever since (Msiska 1997:6).

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