

# Chapter Twenty Nine

## **BUCHI EMECHETA: BEYOND THE TASK AND THE MASK**

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### **Abstract**

*Critical gender theorizing in Africa is vast and deep with a tempo that forms a contour reflecting the divergence of views in its discourse. From the liberal to the radical feminist, arguments abound as to which gender theory best would suit the African environment without it serving as “a red rag to the bull of the African male”. Of the Afro- feminists worthy of mention, Buchi Emecheta occupies the front row. She claims not to be a radical feminist. However, a critical examination of her literary engagement confirms the contrary. This paper therefore is a critique of Emecheta. Consequently, it concludes that what Emecheta preaches as a feminist is not what she practices as a woman outside the lecture theatres. This is the contradistinction in Emecheta’s polemics.*

### **Introduction**

Buchi Emecheta is one of those Afro-feminists who prefer to be called feminists with a small ‘f’. What this means is that they do not subscribe to the hard-line posture of mainstream feminism such as the abolition of marriage and the tendency to see man as enemies. Though they strongly believe in the celebration of women and womanhood, they would prefer to use the dialogic approach rather than being confrontational. As Emecheta herself once said in the well quoted interview with Marie Umeh:

I am a feminist with a small ‘f’. I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital ‘F’ (Feminist) women who say women should live together and all that. I say No. personally I’d like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn’t work, for goodness sake, call it off. (Marry Umeh, in Modupe Kolawole, 1997)

This suggests a middle of the road approach to feminist ideals which has attracted much criticism from hard-line feminist scholars who see this detachment from mainstream feminism as defeatist. Omolara Ogundipe – Leslie strongly frowns at these denials by some Afro-feminist. She wonders why they should deny feminism ‘as if it were a crime to be a feminist’

I would put this down to the successful intimidation of women by men over the issue of women’s liberation and feminism. Male ridicule, aggression and backlash have resulted in making women apologetic, and the term “feminist” a bad name. Yet nothing could be more feminist than the writings of these

women writers, in their concern and deep understanding of the experiences and fates of women in society.

(The Guardian, 1983)

But in spite of this, Buchi Emecheta's feminist orientation panders more to the African position which many ordinary Africans will subscribe to. And this she does in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

It is the story of Nnu Ego whose inability to give birth to a child after her first marriage leads to the various conflicts in the novel. The story is not only that of Nnu Ego but by extension that of the problems all women encounter when they experience delays in giving birth to children – the real joys of motherhood. When this happens, the African man is quick to involve himself in the practice of polygamy in his bid to procreate and prove to the world that he is a man. This is where the problems of women begin. The problem of having to hold one's own when the sustaining interest of the husband is divided not only among his wives, both those he personally married properly and those he inherited, but also among his relatives and friends.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta articulates the positive sides of African tradition as it reflects what feminism to her should be – a feminism that cherishes the invaluable contributions of both men and women in upholding the family as the nucleus of the larger society. Her own feminism does not see men as enemies. For her, a woman should not only submit to the wishes of a man as a father, she owes the obligation to do so to him as a husband. In her adulation of the African man, she says:

How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear the children and look after you and them. So what is there to hate? A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified (P71).

One other thing decipherable from this response which Nnaife gets following his complaint that Nnu Ego does not like his appearance, is that a woman does not always have a choice on who becomes her husband because of the belief that the choice of elders is always a choice of wisdom. Though this may not always be the case, incidents of divorce resulting from modern marriages in which parents have little or no control have proved it to be true. In traditional African society, parents often trace the history of their in-laws' families to determine whether or not they are suited for their children. However, the freedom which mainstream feminism seeks for women deprives them of his very important advantage.

In Emecheta's view, 'the ideal happy marriage' is the one in which a woman 'bears children and looks after them and in which the man looks after the welfare of both mother and

children. But if the man, for reasons beyond his control, is unable to provide for his family the way he should, the woman comes in to play a supportive role. However, Emecheta does not really support Matriarchy. She believes it is the father's primary duty to provide for his family, only that the woman could come in once in a while to fill the vacuum usually created by the man's inability. Unfortunately, feminism with its metropolitan civilization has changed things in which 'men had to be the sole providers; this new setting robbed the women of her useful role' (p 89).

Emecheta tells us that in trying to be supportive; in trying to be a thorough African woman, Nnu Ego loses her first child for Nnaife and having seen that it does not pay 'to be a woman of Ibuza in a town like Lagos' (p89), she decides to play the game according to the new rules given to city women with Western orientation. She urges her husband to 'go and look for a job' because 'that is all I ask, nothing more' (p 92). And in spite of Nnaife's exuberance he could be responsible when situation demands. He proves his responsibility by sending his three year earnings of sixty pounds to Nnu Ego while still at the war front. Not only this, he spends the one hundred pounds left in his passbook on Oshia's education in Warri.

Again, manhood, for Emecheta, should not be ridiculed despite what Nnaife and his likes have reduced it to. The real standard of manhood is seen in the prowess of Agbadi as a hunter and Amatokwu as a farmer. She expects a man to be a man in every sense of it and not a 'baby sitter' or as in the case of Nnaife, merely washing the 'stinking underpants' of their white masters and mistresses (p 50).

Emecheta strongly believes in motherhood. To her, a mother's investment is her children. That is why she criticises Adaku who opts for single motherhood and prostitution, abandoning Nnaife who is away fighting the Germans. In Adaku, Emecheta creates a Firdaus who epitomizes the radical feminist consciousness of El Saadawi in *Woman at Point Zero*. We assume that Emecheta does not share El Saadawi's view of womanhood. That is why perhaps she asks rhetorically in *The JOYS of Motherhood*: 'Have you ever heard of a complete woman without a husband?' (p158).

### **Buchi Emecheta: Behind the Mask**

There is no doubt that Emecheta espouses a feminist disposition that celebrates African womanhood. This includes what it takes to be a wife, a mother and a breadwinner. If nothing else, her *The Joys of Motherhood* has given her a place in the community of foremost female African writers who know what it means to be a woman in traditional African society. However, what one finds disturbing are the apparent contradictions between what she says or writes and what she does. Some of these are reflected in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Even though Emecheta says that she is a feminist who does not share the Western feminist thoughts, we still see her displaying some key characteristics of mainstream feminism in her

works especially *The Joys of Motherhood*. The Euro-feminist ideals found in El Saadawi for instance still rear their heads in Emecheta's writing in spite of the obvious fact that she never pretends to be a hard core feminist. Perhaps these are unconscious instances of the double-talk tradition in which the Afro-feminist flags off an argument and camouflages behind the thin issues involved in feminist polemics.

For instance, Nnu Ego is supposed to be Emecheta's role model as far as the essence of womanhood is concerned in Africa. Her attributes are reflective of an African position which many non-educated ordinary Africans will subscribe to. However, on a few occasions, Nnu Ego ceases to be herself. Instead, Emecheta hides behind her to make informed statements often with the metropolitan coloration of a Euro-feminist. When Nnuego gets fed up with Nnaife's incessant bickering over the behaviour of their children, her reaction becomes rather unusual of a traditional African woman. Her uncanny response of 'I am only waiting for my share of your pension money. I worked for it as well. After, if you don't want me, I can go back to my people' (p 206), rather contradicts the moderate feminist ideal that Emecheta starts off and ends with. It is un-African for a woman to demand for her own share of her husband's estate while the husband still lives.

Again, Emecheta's admonitory rhetorical question earlier quoted is very significant here in our understanding of Emecheta's personality as a writer and as a woman. As a writer, she could not see how a woman could be complete without a husband: 'Have you heard of a complete woman without a husband?' (p. 158). Yet as a woman, Emecheta divorced her husband. Not only that, she lives alone with her five children in South London. This could only mean either of two things. That she is not a complete woman by her argument or that she is only trying to mislead unsuspecting African women whom she desires to keep under by 'blinding them in marriage' as El Saadawi says in *Woman at Point Zero* (pp86 - 87).

Nwokocha Agbadi craves for the love of Ona, Nnu Ego's mother but Nnu Ego's mother does not reciprocate. This, among other reasons, is because Ona's father maintains that she must never marry because she is never going to stoop to any man. Ona is free to have men as lovers and if in the process she gives birth to a son, that son would take Ona's father's name (p .12). This idea of a man encouraging his daughter not to marry so as not to stoop to any man is not in practice at least in Africa. It is an imposition of historical fallacy and a figment of Emecheta's imagination informed by her Western orientation. Here, again, we see Emecheta's subconscious perception at work. Within the Western feminist purview, an arrangement such as advocated above is possible. A trans-imposition of this on Africa is what makes Emecheta's position rather contradictory if we consider her earlier preference for the 'ideal, happy marriage'.

Indeed, Ona's continued refusal to come into Agbadi 's house as his wife is akin to the freedom El Saadawi argues for Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*. Under the African tradition for which Emecheta claims to be speaking, a Woman' should live under the roof of a man called her husband. Any arrangement that reverses this role is unethical and can only be

created by anybody with a Euro- feminist orientation. It is this type of thinking that makes Ona 'to leave her people, not because she allowed her love for Agbadi to rule her action, but because she wanted the safety of her child' (p.28). Here, Emecheta's interest is in the baby, her joy of motherhood, and not in the husband, the pillar of the family, forgetting that the regard accorded this pillar determines the quality of the family and guarantees the real joys of motherhood.

### **Conclusion**

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, almost all the characters at one time or another become Emecheta's mouthpiece as she oscillates between her professed Afro-feminist ideals and the sub-conscious intrusion of Euro- feminist dialectics. Nnu Ego's occasional remarks concerning her mothering role is not consistent with her status as an African woman, going by what that means in Hudson- Weems' *Africana Womanism*. Nnu Ego has to question her position and role as a mother: 'is it such an enviable position?' (p 187) whereas Emecheta has earlier argued that '... part of motherhood was to look a little unfashionable and be able to drawl with joy: 'I can't afford another outfit, because I am nursing him...' (p 80). The voice lurking behind Nnu Ego sometimes is sophisticated and restive. At other times, it allows itself to be led by the submissive spirit of the local tradition. If Nnu ego could say:

I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood Is it such an enviable position? The men makes it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son, I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build" (p 187)

without feeling any sense of guilt, then we know that she has lost all consciousness as an African woman. But we will forgive her because she is a victim of a tactful camouflaging who maunders by fits and starts in the new image Emecheta has made her. We will only leave it to Emecheta to admit that the difficult but exhilarating socio-political challenge facing Afro-feminists today is to come out from behind the mask of ideological bondage created by the West and sustained by the rest. Being neither here nor there is not commitment as far as ideology is concerned. Yet, every writer must be committed, fully and unequivocally too.

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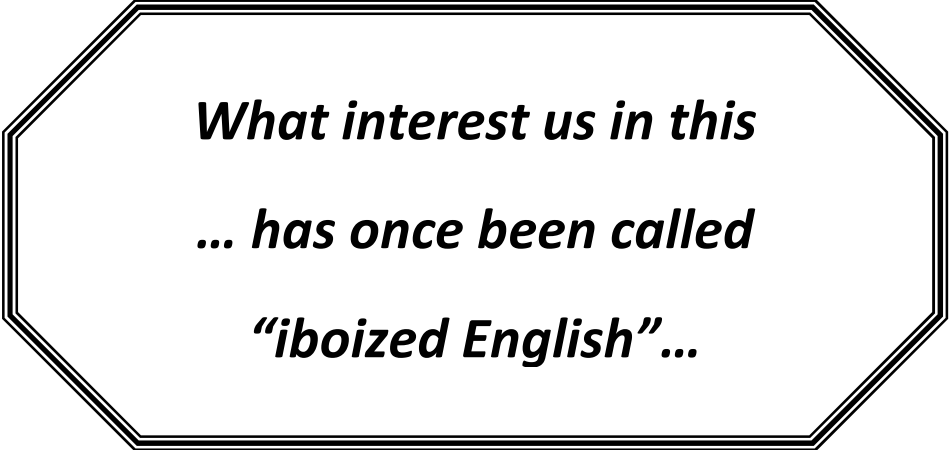
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***What interest us in this  
... has once been called  
“iboized English”...***