

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRACES OF BOND BETWEEN A NOVELIST AND HER CHARACTERS: THE CASE OF BUCHI EMECHETA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Most writers write stories purely from their imagination; few others also write to recount their lives in the form of fictional story lines by choosing imaginative characters to represent them. In this regard, this study is interested in investigating the traces of bond between Emecheta and her characters in her novels. Clearly, she does not allow her readers to know the stories are about her. It is only when readers read her book titled *Head above Water* (1986) that they come to realize that all the stories they have been reading are Emecheta's own life stories. Using the feminist theory, this paper purposively selected five novels of Emecheta and traces the bond that she creates between her and her characters in these novels. The paper concludes that Emecheta displays mastery over her narratives and succeeds in telling her life story through a blend of both fact and fiction.

**Keywords:** fact, fiction, autobiography, Emecheta, story

### **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

According to Palmer (1983), the traditional African woman does not feel that the acceptance of man's dominance necessarily diminishes her; on the contrary, she sees her femininity as consisting precisely in her cheerful acceptance of the prevailing system and her willingness to fulfil her allotted role. The impression, then, according to Palmer, is of an ordered society with women playing a secondary but accepted and important role. Despite the dominance of male writers in African literature, a new generation of writers and critics, most of them women writers, however, is making a great impact on these male-dominated areas. According to Davies and Graves (1986):

“The perspectives of these critics exhibit a double influence and consequently, a tension of sorts. On the one hand, there is a grounding in the need to liberate African people from neo-colonialism and other forms of race and class oppression, coupled with a respect for certain features of traditional African cultures. On the other, there is the influence of the international women's movement and the recognition that a feminist consciousness is necessary in examining the position of women in African societies” (p1).

Busby (1996) also comments that, “African writers are now seeking a respect and recognition that is long overdue. Praise is due those who despite the odds have made it to the print” (p xvii). Clearly, the voicelessness of African women is becoming outdated and for the last three decades, women writers in Africa have gained recognition and made audiences for themselves. Some of these African writers who are able to break into the male-dominated world of African literature include South-African novelist Bessie Head, Ghana's Ama Ata Aidoo and Afua Sutherland,

Senegal's Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall, Nigeria's Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, among others.

Emecheta can be placed in the same category as Maya Angelou who narrates her story using fictional names and familiar settings and situations. Despite the employment of fiction, however, such writers bring on board episodes and incidents from their own life experiences. It is true that writers normally write based on experiences and situations that they have experienced or experiences of a third known party.

Emecheta has published about fifteen novels; however, a paper of this nature will not allow for an examination of all these novels. The research, therefore, focuses on five of her novels. These are *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Destination Biafra* (1982) and *Kehinde* (1994). The implication of this is that, as Emecheta grows in her writing career, so do her heroines and this is reflected in the autobiographical elements that permeate her novels.

The choice of these texts is justified by the consideration that they cover a period of 15 years of Emecheta's writing career spanning 28 years, within which she has written about fifteen novels. Using all these novels would be too wide an area to cover in a small research paper such as this. Therefore, the selection is done based on a criterion which considers setting, themes and characterisation in a chronological reading of her novels. That is, it considers the novels from the earliest to her current works. It is also based on the fact that all the texts fall under one genre of literature - prose narrative. The choice is also based on the critical reception these novels have received. The study is guided by the question, "what are the autobiographical traces in the novels of Emecheta that bind her to her heroines?"

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the autobiographical traces in the stories that link Emecheta to her heroines and also examine the factors or elements that affect or mark the development or growth of the heroines, or factors that make them assertive and triumph over oppressive situations they find themselves in, as portrayed in the selected novels. Particular focus will be on tracing from novel to novel the various episodes that contain striking elements of autobiography.

### **1.1 The Problem Statement**

Available literature shows that even though there are pieces of information on Emecheta's works, the bulk of it has focused on the presentation of themes, characters and language use. There seems to be a neglect of how the structure of Emecheta's personality is reflected in art, through the presentation and development of her heroines, particularly, through the choices they make. Emecheta, herself, has claimed that in some of her novels, she "had put more of (herself)" (*Head Above Water*, 1986: p. 173) in there than she intended to. She also states in the same book that "in *The Bride Price*, I created a girl, Aku-nna, who had an almost identical upbringing to mine...Aku-nna died the death I ought to have died" (*Head above Water*, 1986: p. 155). These, among other instances, also account for the autobiographical elements that abound in her novels and they point to the fact that Emecheta's novels could reflect her own life; or that she may have used her characters to tell the story of the phases of her life and hopes. This perspective to the analysis of her work, however, does not seem to have been given much attention. It is for this reason that this paper seeks to unearth the various traces of autobiography that abound in her works and show how successful she was in employing art to do this.

## **1.2 Scrutiny of Emecheta's Feministic Stance**

This section of the study solely reviews Emecheta's works, particularly, the ones selected for the study. According to Flora Nwapa (quoted in Umeh, 1996), "every artist thrives on controversy; so you are killing the writer if you don't even talk about her. Being ignored is worse than when you are writing trash about her". That Buchi Emecheta's work has been more successful than that of her fore-sisters is a phenomenon that must be placed in context. To better appreciate the significance of Marie Umeh's tribute to Emecheta, we must consider the context in which other writers have struggled for recognition (Busby, 1996).

Ama Ata Aidoo, another pioneer who also deserves celebration, believes that the question of the woman writer's voice being muted has to do with the position of women in society generally. Women writers are just receiving the writer's version of the general neglect and disregard that women in the larger society receive:

"The assessment of a writer's work is in the hands of critics and it is the critics who put people on pedestals, sweep them under the carpet or put them in a cupboard, lock the door and throw the key away. I feel that wittingly or unwittingly, people may be doing this to African women writers... Bessie Head died of neglect. So how is she going to be an Achebe? When nobody gives recognition to her as Bessie Head, as woman in her own right writing something relevant and meaningful?" (Quoted in Umeh, 1996)

The role of critics in the fortunes of African women writers deserves fuller exploration elsewhere. However, it is significant, that according to Stratton (1994), "Buchi Emecheta's upward literary mobility has been due largely to the attentions she has received from feminist critics", for male critics are frequently patronizing and legislative about women's writing, (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1991):

"Many feel the concerns of women are not serious enough since they are about the area of emotions and the private life. I wonder how we got the idea in colonized societies that only political themes are respectable. A cultural lag from colonial times perhaps. Great literature has always been about human emotions and the actions which spring from them."

In the foreword to Umeh (1996), Busby comments that "that... Buchi Emecheta... now inspires this varied collection of essays is no slight achievement, for the first step towards ensuring that our future writers receive the lifeblood of critical attention while they are still creating depends precisely on such consideration." According to Stratton (1994), the outspokenness of Buchi Emecheta's writing has shown the way. She can be seen as "both a disruptive and a cohesive force within the contemporary African literary tradition", firmly situated within a female tradition, which she celebrates, from which position she launches an attack on the male tradition. Emecheta's voice of protest against the patriarchal myopic vision of Igbo women's roles and her unwavering attempt to improve the quality of African women's lives has generated much literary criticism.

Chukwuma (1989) asserts that Emecheta's heroines have developed from insignificant people give them to significant and acknowledging ones. Thus, she states that "the rural back-house, timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman has been replaced by her modern counterpart, a full-

rounder human being, who is rotational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own” (p. 2). She stresses the point of inequality of opportunity between the sexes and the conscious, rationalised effort to subsume the female for the upliftment of the male as heir. Chukwuma further comments that “Emecheta’s feministic stance is seen in the female’s reactions to these situations. Her characters adopt a positivist view in crisis and do not just fold their arms in tears and self-pity. Rather, they think, plan, execute and concretise. In each situation of her novels, the test for the woman is how to escape the tyranny of a tradition and a system, assert her individuality while still playing out the roles of daughter, wife and mother. In the final analysis, it is the individual who counts, the individual must satisfy himself and herself first and then the society”.

We can, therefore, say from the above that while tradition demands silent submission from women, Emecheta on the contrary, creates female characters that are vocal, sensitive and realistic. She then puts them in meaningful dialogic relationships simultaneously with the self and with others of the same ilk, as we experience in her novels. Women whose discourse communities are now shared by emphatic and like-minded participants articulate the hopes, fears and aspirations of women.

### **1.3 Feminist Theory**

The preference for this criticism is important because since the texts for the research are presented from within a predominantly female sensibility, some of which are autobiographical, it would help in examining and answering questions on the presentation of stereotypical images of women in African literature.

Code (2000) defines feminist critical criticism as:

“a critical form of knowledge which analyzes the role that literary forms and practices, together with the discourses of literary criticism and theory, play in perpetuating or challenging hierarchies of gender, class, race and sexuality.” (p. 306).

This criticism is part of what DiYanni (2000) terms the sociological perspectives on literary criticism. According to him, sociological critics argue that literary works should not be isolated from the social contexts in which they are embedded. Feminist critics consider literature in relation to its social, economic and political contexts, and indeed look to analyse its social, economic and political content. They also see literature as an agent for social transformation. It is for this reason that Schweickart (1986), also argues that feminist criticism is necessary because the feminist critic sees the literary canon as androcentric and this has a profoundly damaging effect on women readers. Also, like historical critics, especially those who espouse new historical perspectives, sociological critics emphasize the ways power relations are played out by varying social forces and institutions. Critics employing a sociological perspective study the economic, political and cultural issues expressed in literary works as those issues are reflected in the societies in which the works were produced.

In her influential essay “Toward a Feminist Poetics”, Showalter (1997) asserts that feminist theorist must “construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt to male models and theories”, a process she names gynocriticism. Through gynocriticism, Showalter exposes the false cultural assumptions and characteristics of women as depicted in canonical literature. By exposing these inaccurate pictures (often caricatures) of women, gyno-critics – the name

Showalter gives to those critics who “construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt to male models and theories” – and gynocriticism provide critics with four models that address the nature of women’s writing: the biological, the linguistic, the psychoanalytic and the cultural.

Each of Showalter’s models is sequential, subsuming and developing the preceding model or models. The biological model emphasises how the female body marks itself upon a text by providing a host of literary images along with a personal and intimate tone. The linguistic model addresses the need for a female discourse, investigating the differences between how women and men use language. This model asserts that women create and write in a language peculiar to their gender and addresses the ways in which this female language can be used in their writings. The psychoanalytic model analyses the female psyche and demonstrates how such an analysis affects the writing process, emphasising the flux and fluidity of female writing as opposed to male writing’s rigidity and structure. The last of Showalter’s models, the cultural model, investigates how society shapes women’s goal, responses and points of view.

It must be noted that there is no one view about feminism. Because feminist literary criticisms are polyphonic, a variety of feminist approaches to textual analysis exists. Some feminist critics debunk male superiority by exposing stereotypes of women in all literary periods. Women, they assert, cannot be simply depicted and classified as angels or demons, saints or whores, brainless housewives or eccentric spinsters. Such characterizations must be continually identified and then challenged, just as Emecheta does in her novels.

## **2.0 TRACES OF BOND BETWEEN EMECHETTA AND HER HEROINES**

This part of the study takes a critical look at the various characters that Emecheta creates and shows how she injects herself in all these characters to tell the world her story which is meant to change the world as far as barriers created for humankind, specifically women in the area of patriarchal traditions and stereotypes are concerned. The characters that would be considered are Adah in *Second-Class Citizen*, Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Debbie in *Destination Biafra* and finally, Kehinde in *Kehinde*.

### **2.1 Emecheta in Ada’s Story**

The first story this paper focuses on is *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah’s insignificance is made manifest right from birth. Although Adah, the heroine, is portrayed as an intelligent and ambitious young girl, she has to fight against considerable odds to gain formal education in Lagos. According to Uwakweh (1995), in this novel, Emecheta develops further the theme of self-assertion and personal development, which she began in *In the Ditch*. The story, as has already been stated, details the plethora of problems that assail the heroine, Adah, as she struggles to adapt to her social environment. The first time readers meet her, they are made aware of how insignificant she is in her patriarchal society, which subsumes the female for the upliftment of the male as heir.

Adah, as ambitious as she is, has to fight against these considerable odds to gain formal education in Lagos and later in England. As a child, she has to force herself into the classroom of a friendly neighbouring teacher before she is finally enrolled in school. After a life of abject misery and exploitation, and by dint of hard work and proper self-motivation, she is able to win a scholarship in the highly competitive secondary school entrance examinations. Her personal effort to acquire education and become a librarian in Lagos registers early successes against a conservative background that stifles a woman’s personal growth and development. In effect, it is

the individual who has to act to achieve self-definition and Adah does just that. Incidentally, reading Emecheta's self-professed autobiography, *Head above Water*, one discovers that young Emecheta goes through the same thing Adah undergoes in the novel.

The characterization of Adah as a 'second-class citizen', the definition which also gives Emecheta's second novel its title, illustrates the author's thorough exploration of gender discrimination in her native Nigerian society and in African immigrant communities in Britain. Like the majority of women in Emecheta's works, Adah is a second-class citizen in Nigeria where her parents initially deny her a proper education and arrange her marriage. She is equally second-class in England both because she is black and because the Nigerian diasporic community replicates the patriarchal values of the mother country.

However, towards the end of the story, Adah fully recognises Francis' absolute lack of love for her as well as the need for her own freedom. She is greatly assisted in this regard by another cast of characters who, in different ways, help her on the path towards the knowledge of her self-worth. Several of these characters (such as her boss at the Finchley Road Library, Mrs. Konrad and Mr. Okpara, the Nigerian who repeatedly urges Francis to smarten up) belong to the structural category often referred to as "adjuvants", i.e., those characters who guide the protagonist of a novel of personal development on the right path. But one "adjuvant" who is of particular note is Bill, the bibliophile from Canada. He is the character who not only encourages Adah to read several African and other literary works but who also literally guides her on the path of becoming a writer. Not surprisingly, the narrator remarks that "Bill was the first real friend [Adah] had had outside her family" (p. 161).

It must be emphasised that Adah takes the final decision to stop taking care of Francis and leaves him, which also marks the pinnacle of her development in the novel. Finally, Adah's success at breaking her marriage with Francis is facilitated by her migration to England and the education she has acquired. Because she finds herself in a land which does not put too much premium on the African culture (Ibuzza culture), she is finally able to deal with the psychological pressures her decision brings upon her. She chooses her faith and this marks her total development from her powerlessness to self-awareness. Thus, she could be described as a dynamic character. Adah's stance at the end of the novel is similar to that of Emecheta's experience and it buttresses the autobiographical elements in her works and this serves the use of the feminist literary criticism well.

## **2.2 Emecheta in *Aku-nna's* Story**

Emecheta's *The Bride Price* was written when she had become a full-fledged author and her heroine's story, according to Kemp (1999), makes a clear criticism of the traditional bride wealth system, while not openly condemning it. Emecheta achieves this by allowing the ending of the novel to capitulate to the same tradition that she spends much of the novel reproving. The story centres on the romance between *Aku-nna* and Chike, the village schoolteacher. Their love is generally discouraged by the whole Ibuzza village because Chike is the descendant of a slave. This supposedly tainted heritage means nothing to *Aku-nna*, who has spent her formative years in Lagos, educated in Christian schools. The family moves to Ibuzza after her father dies and *Aku-nna's* mother becomes the fourth wife of her uncle. An ambitious man seeking the "obi" title, the uncle follows custom by marrying his brother's widow, primarily because *Aku-nna's* education will bring a high bride price when she marries.

Emecheta virtually stockpiles sentiment for Aku-nna by dwelling on the narrow disregard for the individual found within traditional conventions surrounding marriage and by building sympathy for the young couple through her emphasis on romantic love.

Aku-nna's problems begin to worsen after the death of her father, and after her family moves to Ibuza, her hometown. She is forced to face strict interpretations of the traditions of her society when she is taken back to the family's ancestral village. There, Aku-nna is often criticized because of her modesty. She does not like bathing in the nude in public. She is also criticized because she is allowed to continue her schooling. But it is her friendship with Chike, a descendant of a slave, which is her final undoing. This begins with her education and the final decisions or choices she makes to survive in this male-dominated society. Aku-nna's experience of social bias towards her education underlines her disadvantaged status as female. The tension between female education and gender socialization is first mentioned by Auntie Matilda in Lagos after Ezekiel's burial.

It must be noted that Aku-nna's migration from Lagos to Ibuza is of much significance to this discussion. When she moves to Ibuza she starts to show signs of asserting herself, and eventually builds up to her final revolt. At Ibuza, Aku-nna begins to show the willingness to assert her womanhood and subsequent freedom from her tradition. As she walks down the dusty road to her village, Aku-nna creates the first hint of rebellion when she stands her ground and refuses to take the bicycle ride that is offered her and then, later refuses to undress to take a public bath. These are minor discretions but nonetheless, they are Aku-nna's first steps towards asserting her opinions in this male-dominated society.

According to Igbo custom, Aku-nna is eligible for a legal customary marriage when she begins to menstruate around age fifteen. By customary law, puberty must be reached before marriage (Kasunmu & Salacuse, 1966). According to received British common law (as interpreted by Nigerian lawyers for its relevance in Nigeria), the minimum marriage age for a monogamous marriage for boys was age fourteen and for girls age twelve, because the Nigerian jurists viewed the age of twenty-one for marriage in modern England as legally irrelevant for use in Nigeria (Kasunmu & Salacuse, 1966). Emecheta follows Igbo tradition in portraying that most Igbo girls were betrothed and entered an arranged customary marriage soon after their first menstruation. However, modern Nigerian jurists recommended that the minimal marriage age should be higher, sixteen, due to poor nutrition to give the girls more physical development before childbearing. This could be partly one of the reasons why Aku-nna does not survive the birth of her first child.

Later when Aku-nna realises that she cannot continue to keep her menstruation a secret, "She came to the conclusion that there was no alternative open to her but to let her mother know. She sensed what this would mean; she would no longer be regarded as a child who knew nothing, but as a young woman on the verge of parenthood." (p. 107) She, therefore, decides to marry Chike, the man of her choice. Against the backdrop that Chike is a descendant of slaves and, therefore, will be rejected by her uncle, Okonkwo, and the entire family, Aku-nna makes a very bold decision to bring a change in her life. Thus, she takes a bold step in choosing her own lover (Chike) against the choice for her (Okoboshi). She does this with the full knowledge of the customs and traditions of Ibuza and also the consequences of going against them. Emecheta uses the ants and their willingness to follow an invisible power as an example of the people of Ibuza following the traditional ways without questioning the reasons behind them. When Aku-nna asks Chike why the ants are following one another, he explains further the need to follow tradition. He says to her that they follow each other because,

“...each ant would be lost if it did not follow the footsteps of those in front, those who have gone on that very path before.” (p 92)

Finally, *The Bride Price* ends with the defeat of what is clearly portrayed as progressive forces but this somewhat surprising defeat only helps to highlight the injustice of the situation. Thus, the heroine experiences the group mind – the mind-set that demands all members of the tribe to think as one. “...It would not occur to any one of them to behave or act differently.” The existence of the tribe depends on this. So when Aku-nna, more so than Chike, who is even more marginalized than she is, tries to think independently, she finds that it is far more difficult than she imagined. She could run away. She could marry the man she loved. But she remains in bondage to the traditional ways of her people. Her mind is connected to the group mind and it is the group mind that sentences her to her death.

Emecheta’s emphasis on the “group mind” is a preface to her authorial commentary that Aku-nna’s independent decision to marry a descendant of a slave brings an unbearable “guilt” that causes her death: “guilt for going against her mother and her uncle killed her...” Here, it is not only the woman’s predicament that engages our attention but also the enslavement and degradation of the individual psyche become evident from Chike’s experiences as well.

Aku-nna thus becomes the victim of a vicious circle of punishment and her own inability to enjoy total physical and psychological revolt against stultifying conventions. Emecheta herself recognises the psychological nature of this warfare as being more potent than the imposition of some divine or supernatural will.

Emecheta displays autobiographical traits in this novel though the whole story is not entirely true about the life of Buchi Emecheta. She takes her readers down memory lane and narrates incidents that took place in her childhood. The incidents which account for her childhood include the premium that her father and the Ibuza society accorded male children over female children, the love and respect she had for her father who passed away very early in her life, her decision to choose education over getting herself married off early because she has just menstruated, her decision to choose the man she wanted to marry instead of the one that society chose for her, and so on and so forth.

It is, however, important to state that Emecheta allows the introduction of story lines which are fictional to make up for the message she hoped to put across. A closer recollection of the analysis made about the theory of autobiography clearly reminds one of the shortfalls that occur in autobiography: the fact that readers and even sometimes writers are subsumed into the confusion that occurs in the blend of fiction and reality. That is exactly what happens in Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*. Obviously, the story is a tragedy that results in the death of the heroine but the writer Emecheta lives on in another life to continue narrating another story that recounts another phase of her life as an autobiographer.

### **2.3 Emecheta and Nnu Ego’s Story**

Just as we have seen in Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*, Nnu Ego, the heroine of the third novel under study, *The Joys of Motherhood* is portrayed as a character who is very feeble, powerless and susceptible to whatever her father, and for that matter her tradition, wills for her without questioning. Thus, from her actions and what the author tells us, we form the impression of her being obedient, patient and voiceless. These descriptions are sanctioned by the societal restriction on the female to challenge any decision that is made for her, whether she is in favour of it or not. The idea, as already expressed in *The Bride Price* is that “...you are not allowed to



speak in that way to an adult, especially your father". For example, when her father, Agbadi plans her second marriage to Nnaife, she accepts without questioning. She tells the father: "I wish I did not have to go so far away from you, Father; but if you wish it so, so it will be" (p. 38). The society within which Nnu Ego operates is one that recognises male supremacy in all its ramifications. Here, the roles of men and women are very sharply defined.

Some of the most touching scenes of the novel bring to life the excruciating poverty of Nnu Ego as she struggles single-handedly to sustain her children. To be able to look after them, Nnu Ego refuses to handle an extensive business, often displaying a meagre stall in front of her house. Oshia's illness, resulting from malnutrition, frightens Nnu Ego. Her heart-rending cry: "Please don't die and go away" (p 104) does not only reflect the heroine's fears but indicates the agony of every woman who is in danger of losing a child to whom she has devoted her life. As the children mature and grow away from her, she finally realises that the joy of motherhood is only that of giving everything to one's children rather than reaping any rewards. Her sons, Oshia and Adim, who have developed beyond the communality of Igbo traditional life, fail to remember their mother; rather, they struggle to advance only themselves. Consequently, Nnu Ego is left stranded.

As had already been explored previously in the lives of Adah and Aku-nna, they are able rebel in that manner because of the education they have acquired. It serves as an eye-opener to them. Unlike these two, Nnu Ego, because of her lack of education, that is, her illiteracy, she is not able to rebel in their manner. She has internalised the traditions of her land so much so that she remains faithful to and oppressed by them till almost when it is a little too late to rebel. However, it must be noted that though Nnu Ego lacked the strength and will to revolt, she gains consciousness of her situation and starts questioning the patriarchal institutions that oppress women, and therefore, she turns out to be a dynamic character. She becomes aware also that if she had had some education, she would have been able to challenge the traditions and customs that she so strongly adhered to. It is in this light that Nnu Ego advocates for education for all women, as we shall see in the life of the heroine of the fourth novel, *Destination Biafra*, under study.

Obviously, the story in *The Joys of Motherhood* cannot directly be traced back to the life of Buchi Emecheta though to some extent every good reader can still find her in there. Emecheta gave birth to many children just like the heroine in *The Joys of Motherhood*. It could be argued that Emecheta perhaps wrote this story to display her fear of losing all her children one day despite the fact that she decided to toil to take care of them when she lost her marriage.

#### **2.4 Emecheta and Debbie's Story**

When we first meet Debbie Ogedemgbe, the heroine in *Destination Biafra*, we are impressed by her thoughtful and somewhat progressive ideas. No doubt, she comes from an extremely privileged background: her corrupt and fabulously wealthy father is the finance minister in the first post-independence government in Nigeria and she had lived a good portion of her life in England. It is clear from the moment she is introduced, that her Oxford education notwithstanding, she is not satisfied with and cannot accept the status quo. Of course, her background and social class have not prepared her for or even provided her with revolutionary credentials, so Emecheta depicts her initially in an ambivalent manner.

In this novel, though it is not probably the only war novel within recent memory written by a woman, it certainly is the first African novel that backs up some anonymous assertions that civil wars, which take place on 'home' territory, have more potential than other wars to transform

women's expectations. According to Porter (1986), that women are present and at times play active roles in other Nigerian war novels, is not in doubt. Where Emecheta is different from other chroniclers of the civil war, however, is in her presentation of female characters who transcend the traditional and stereotypical roles often reserved for them. The female characters are presented as people (most of them ordinary folks) who are forced by personal experience, idealism or the suffering of others to become active participants in the struggle for genuine freedom.

In terms of conception, if not total actualisation, *Destination Biafra* is Buchi Emecheta's most ambitious novel to date (Chukukere, 1995). It is a war novel and departs in subject matter from the previous preoccupations. However, she continues to celebrate the lives of women caught up in the ravages of history. In her previous works, it is shown that the dilemma which confronts women is largely restricted to the private lives, especially their interpersonal relationships with family members and immediate committees.

The experiences of the heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe, string together a multi-faceted account of the civil strife and the events that lead to it. Her activities help to underline the political and moral bankruptcy of the two sides in the conflict. Debbie is unique because she, more than any other of the novelist's heroines, challenges the stereotyped images of the African woman in fiction. As the daughter of the rich but corrupt politician, Samuel Ogedemgbe, as has already been stated, her birth into an upper-class family makes her familiar with major figures in the national political history. She is also on speaking terms with members of the military elite and enjoys a relationship with Captain Alan Grey, the ubiquitous representative of Britain's exploitative ambitions. Debbie's social connections thus ensure the legitimacy of her roles and make them acceptable to the audience.

Against the background of Nnu Ego succumbing to the dictates of her society, Debbie's characterisation turns out to be an improvement. Thus, she makes her intentions clear to readers and her society that she is not going to tow the line of women who are submissive to the oppressive structures of their society without questioning the grounds for which they are being oppressed. She almost seems ready to accept the stereotypical role that her parents and society expects of her, while her own instincts push her towards revolutionary and liberating idealism. So, during the Abosi's wedding reception, for example, she "charmed everyone, playing the dutiful daughter of Samuel Ogedemgbe". (p. 43)

She makes this bold decision, just like Adah and Aku-nna, to assert her individuality. However, unlike these two, Debbie does not opt for any partner of her choice in marriage. What she does, in fact, is, in defiance of her parents', to enlist in the army. Through this infringement upon the man's accepted domain, she proves "...that a woman can be just as useful to her country as a man in times of distress and national reconstruction".

As military officers, both Debbie and Babs discharge various assignments. Babs is sent to train female military recruits at Abeokuta and Debbie is to undertake a peace mission to Abosi. Meanwhile, the novelist is careful to note the heroine's changed circumstances in conformity with her new status as a soldier. While her shapeless green army uniform obliterates her erstwhile feminine qualities of grace and elegance, her actions show a determination to carry out her stated intentions

Debbie's incentive for entering the army and her initial performance there may not have been particularly impressive. However, Emecheta allows her to develop into a more mature individual with great potential for leadership (on both the military and civilian levels) than almost all of the

men who had previously been in charge. She begins to show signs of maturity by asserting quite firmly to her British lover Alan Grey that Britain, with its “divide and rule” policy has been partly responsible for the sad state of affairs in Nigeria. She also expresses the dilemma in which at least some Nigerians would have found themselves during the war when she tells her mother: “trouble is, I want to continue as a Nigerian soldier and at the same time still feel like helping Abosi” (p114)

The story as was unfolding clearly is not a story that highlights the life story of Emecheta but the fact remains that according to Emecheta herself this is a story about her close friend who returns from Europe to enlist in the Nigerian army during the Nigerian Civil War contrary to the wishes of her parents. It presupposes that she told the story through the eyes of her friend. Her message, however, is clear – that women can still assert their independence provided they set their eyes to the prize and are willing to take their destiny into their hands no matter the stereotypes.

## **2.5 Emecheta and Kehinde’s Story**

So far, the researcher has been looking at the development of the heroine in Emecheta’s novels, and has created the awareness that there is actually some development or growth of the heroines in the selected novels for the study. Now, in *Kehinde*, the last novel to be discussed in this study, Emecheta, through Kehinde, the heroine, traces the bicultural and immigrant identity present in all of her novels. It may also be considered as the one novel in which the process of cross-cultural adaptation as experienced by post-war Nigerian immigrants in Britain can be openly observed through the study of major characters. Hawley (1996), for example, suggests that the completion of the process of cross-cultural adaptation by Kehinde is also the resolution of Emecheta’s own cross-cultural conflict as a Nigerian female immigrant in London. In other words, the last novel is the phase in which Emecheta compares and contrasts her two countries and makes a final decision on which one she belongs to, giving credence to the autobiographical elements in her novel.

In this novel, Emecheta confronts African patriarchy directly in the portrayal of Kehinde Okolo’s life both in London and Nigeria. In terms of subject matter, Emecheta’s depiction of female independence is indicative of her ideological commitment to feminism. Emecheta (1996) maintains that her residence in Europe has made her more perceptive of the disadvantages African women face. She states, “It is when you’re out of your country that you can see the faults in your society.” Without a doubt, her career as a writer is geared towards exposing the social inequities facing African women. This primary objective places her in the forefront of African feminism. Emecheta has, however, rejected the feminist label.

When the novel opens, Kehinde is introduced to readers as an independent career woman. She is a professional worker in a bank and earns more money than her husband, Albert. Her position in the bank had enabled them to get mortgage for their house. Her financial advantage over her husband, therefore, entitles her to 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” (p 4). Albert conversely 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.

Even though Kehinde is portrayed as an independent career woman, she is still psychologically enslaved by the traditions of her homeland, Nigeria. She is initially portrayed as a weak character

who lacks the power to make decisions for herself and she, reluctantly, becomes involved in Francis' dream of a satisfactory life as a *been-to*. She says to herself:

She was going to buy more Western luxuries she knew would need to establish herself as the *been-to* madam of the house – essentials like a washing machine, a fridge, a television and a video recorder. As for a music centre, she would buy the biggest and loudest she could afford (p. 38).

Another significant incident that illustrates how Kehinde has internalised the dictates of her society and does not challenge its oppressive tools is her inability to fully resist Albert's proposition that they should abort her pregnancy. Because of his wife's unplanned pregnancy, Albert selfishly persuades her to get an abortion, as has already been stated. This is primarily to ensure his homecoming plans and his wife's promotion. He rejects tradition where it suits his purpose by arguing that "this is not the right time for another one. I know abortion is wrong but we are in a strange land, where you do things contrary to your culture." (p15). In this critical situation, Albert is unable to comfort his wife. He seems oblivious of her pain and offers nothing except his regret on the loss of a man-child. If Kehinde accepts the abortion plan as a condition for marital peace, she is wrong. She perceives her action as a concession that entitles her to greater devotion from her husband. She fails to heed the inner voice, which is also the voice of her *chi* and her dead twin sister, Taiwo. Whereas the abortion may have ensured her promotion, it proves otherwise for her marriage. It is surprising that she becomes more amenable to her inner urging to go home to Nigeria when her fears about Albert's infidelity become strongly insistent. No sooner has Albert settled in Nigeria than he saddles himself with another wife, thus putting Kehinde in an unwanted and unasked for position as a senior wife.

When Kehinde finally joins Albert in Nigeria, she, just like Adah, also moves from "a first-class citizen" in her marriage (in England) to "a second-class citizen" in her homeland, Nigeria. It is quite ironical that in her own country, she is "a second-class citizen". It is, therefore, not surprising that she eventually rejects her homeland and makes the foreign (England) her home. Back in Nigeria, the institution of polygamy is used as a tool to oppress Kehinde, both physically and psychologically, to the extent that she loses her self-worth. She also realises the extent to which women help in the strengthening of such an institution to function and flourish. Gradually, her stay in Nigeria and the experiences she goes through prepare her for her final break with Albert. She gains consciousness of her situation and thus achieves a psychological freedom which builds up to her final successes.

Kehinde's decision to return to Britain after her disappointment in Nigeria is also evaluated by Hawley (1996). He states that Kehinde's case is an example of a "progressive" mode of orientation in immigrant literature, "in which the individual critically assesses his past and present situation and acts according to the conclusions he draws in order to improve his situation" (qtd. in Hawley, 339). Therefore, her return is what Bhabha (1990) calls "the return of the diasporic, the post-colonial [hybrid]" (p. 319).

When Kehinde arrives in Britain, she feels herself liberated and comfortably "at home" and after the depressing atmosphere of Nigerian life, she is surprised at the welcome given her at the airport. Thus, the rejuvenated is given a better treatment on her arrival. In addition, Emecheta's tone in *Kehinde* suggests that she has reached a certain level of comfort in her resolution of this dual attraction to two cultures. It is important to note that just before her protagonist removes the "For Sale" sign, she has a significant visitation.

Finally, Kehinde appears to be a “traditional” female who believes that a woman’s proper place is in marriage, beside her husband. Yet she shows no convincing reasons for abandoning the same institution for which she had derided Mary Elikwu, other than reasons of humiliation and betrayal. Kehinde’s attempts at reconciliation with Mary Elikwu are born of guilt rather than admiration for the latter’s status as a “single” mother. Kehinde may, therefore, be charged with over-reaction to a situation which she could have explored for its benefits. Ironically, it is Rike’s educational qualification and her independence that are instrumental in Kehinde’s decision to further her education. Nevertheless, Kehinde is able to recognise her follies and re-strategise and makes a choice to make things right.

Once again, the novel ends with the victory of the heroine – a victory that is more convincing than in the previous novels, perhaps because it is closer to the author’s own experience. The heroine seems to speak with the voice of Emecheta herself when she says, “I have a degree and a job at the Department of Social Services; I’m enjoying meeting people and leading my own life”. Although she is inwardly suffering from her humiliating marital situation, she even manages to evoke it with humour by saying that that was one of the beauties of polygamy and that it gave one freedom. This novel clearly depicts the story of Emecheta when she suffers from marital humiliation but finally manages to assert her freedom to take charge of her life and doing what she loves doing best – writing. It has no direct relationship from step to step as compared to Emecheta’s own life but the end result of Kehinde’s action is similar to hers. She once again manages to blend fact with fiction to enable her develop a plot that has the same thematic continuity and message like most of her story lines.

### **3.0 CONCLUSION**

This study has discussed the various traces of bond that Emecheta creates between herself and that of her characters in telling her story. Using the theories of feminism, the study has explained how Emecheta manages to drive home her themes of feminist emancipation over patriarchy. Five of Emecheta’s novels were selected for the study namely *Second Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Destination Biafra*, and *Kehinde*. The study sought to explain that Emecheta inserts portions of her own life experiences into the novels. However, it found out that in doing this, Emecheta blends facts with fiction.

Indeed, the paper recognizes that Emecheta is uncompromising in her representation of the disempowerment of women by a combination of unfavourable patriarchal and traditional structures both in Nigeria and in London. She creates female characters through whose voices and experiences she criticizes stereotyped one-dimensional and romanticised representations of women in male authored texts, whose constructions of women’s identities are based exclusively on their biological and social functions as mothers, wives and mistresses.

Generally, her works are populated with women who eventually challenge oppressive social or cultural restrictions. In *The Bride Price* (1976), Aku-nna rebels against tradition by choosing her own husband despite her family’s objections. Adah in *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* as well as Kehinde in *Kehinde* (1994) defy cultural practices that bind them to emotionally abusive husbands and leave their marriages to embark on fictional journeys of self-discovery, as does Emecheta herself according to her autobiography *Head above Water*. In *Destination Biafra* (1982), Debbie Ogedemgbe is a Nigerian “Joan of Arc”, who, despite opposition and the corrupt machinations of the political leaders, attempts to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the Nigerian civil war. The assertiveness of the female characters clearly shows that there is some form of development in the characterisation of her heroines.

Emecheta's criticism of women's subordination includes a condemnation of women's complacency, hypocrisy and unwitting complicity in their own subordination. Her criticism of patriarchy as a source of women's subjugation has also earned her the wrath of many male readers and critics, who see her as an antagonistic African woman writer who has been tainted by Western feminism (Gikandi, 2003). Ironically, Emecheta has not fully accepted the feminist label. She states in her essay "Feminism with a Small 'f'" (Petersen, 1988) that:

"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' (p. 173-182)."

She goes on to say that:

"There are so many feminist dogmas I believe in, like education and the freedom of the individual: in fact I'm a feminist plus, but there's no root in middle class feminist attitudes now for the black woman's plight" (p173-182)

For most of Emecheta's characters, as shown in the paper, the act of speaking up becomes an initial step towards resistance against silencing. It is, therefore, that commitment to dismantling women's subjugation that has made Emecheta a force of transformation, particularly in the writing of black women's experiences. Emecheta's black woman, as shown in almost all her stories, and even from her own life experience, is often born into relative poverty and with limited social opportunities; she is more concerned with aspiring towards the status of the middle class married woman. Her middle class counterpart, on the other hand, having already achieved these basic comforts, wishes to be liberated from the shackles and dependency of marriage. By the intrinsic nature of the African family system, the black woman still passionately believes in the primacy of the family, especially motherhood. Emecheta's concerns in her novels centre on the woman's unique confrontation with male superiority, female subjectivity and socially endorsed norms that inhibit her progress. The predicaments of poverty, unhappiness and brutality are forces which her heroines struggle to conquer. These heroines, in spite of deeply ingrained notions of dependency, also possess, sometimes, an innate determination to succeed. Although they may not always break free, through their attempts, the writer contends that even in the most stifling circumstances, the individual never really loses the potential for choice and strength.

However, much as one may wish to circumvent the current issue of feminism with its ingrained social value judgments, one cannot but recognise Buchi Emecheta's inclination towards that movement. She proves, through her vision that unlike the romanticised images of fictive women by men, her heroines have never really been free, content or self-fulfilled. Through real and imagined experiences, she explores, unlimitedly, areas of the woman's psyche hitherto ignored by or inaccessible to male writers. The consequence is a unique celebration of the black woman's extraordinarily difficult life both in a traditional and in a changing society. Her heroines include the deprived, discontented and social misfits, the "second-class" citizens, the slaves, the pathetic mothers who give all to their families but reap no rewards, and the dynamic survivors in a society that brutalises them. Through these images that she creates with poignancy and empathy, the novelist denounces fiercely sexual inequality in tones that approximate the militant rhetoric of contemporary feminism in Europe.

Finally, it can be concluded that most of her novels under consideration directly portray Emecheta's life, though she does not use actual names. A careful reading of her autobiographical

text, *Head above Water* proves this assertion right. For those that do not directly depict her life, one gets an inclination that she creates a character that she can identify with. It can be said that these characters are not just figments of Emecheta's imagination but people whose issues, she believes, many marginalized women in society identify with. She does employ fiction through art to exhibit these in a very crafty way.

Thus, Emecheta writes on topics that touch on her early and adult life and attempts achieving personal survival as well as topics of social and cultural significance. In all these, she shows how competently she can handle a variety of topics ranging from love affairs, slavery, home and family life, culture and tradition, politics and war. In each of her novels, she injects part or whole of an important aspect of her life. She uses this to project how oppressed her heroines are in marriage, motherhood, childbearing, politics, among others. In examining these ethically through the eyes of her heroines, she asks appropriate questions and makes her heroines assert their individuality through the choices they make, and then leaves readers with an unresolved dilemma.

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