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A Rereading of the Power Dynamics of Black Women: Perspectives of Buchi Emecheta, an African Feminist with a small ‘f’

S. Selvakumar^{a1}, Dr. S. Joseph Arul Jayraj^b

^a Ph.D Research Scholar, Research Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Trichy – 620002, Tamil Nadu, India.

^b Head & Associate Professor (Retd), Research Department of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University), Trichy – 620002, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract

Feminism as an ideology, philosophy, theory and movement addresses all matters pertinent to women. It celebrates women, their achievements, and their glorious past which have been conveniently concealed by the oppressive structures. It aims to cull out the authoritarian, hypocritical and prejudiced thought pattern and constructions that have been erroneously construed on women in social, cultural, political and literal context, especially to relegate them to the peripheries. Feminism aims to dismantle and debunk all such false notions and work for women empowerment and emancipation. It strives to establish equity for women in par with men in all activities of the society at large. Buchi Emecheta as a renowned novelist addresses the concerns of African women both in Nigeria and Diaspora and emboldens women to devise new plan of actions for heyday.

Keywords: Enslavement, Emancipation, Feminism, Patriarchy, Subjugation, and Mechanism.

1. Introduction

Literature has been viewed traditionally as ‘mirror of life’ and indeed it is true since it encompasses the human life in totality. A reader can understand the prominence of literature, while reading a literary text as it throws light on the dynamics of human life with varied reflections and new insights. In the trajectory of literary analysis of great writings, scholars have come up with the discovery of new literary theories which have created cascading effects on the construction and interpretation of literary writings. Among the varied literary theories that are prevalent, the theory on ‘Feminism’ does play a decisive role in offering critique on the established notions and thought patterns of the patriarchal writings and seek to establish legitimate and equitable role for women in literary writings and in educational, social, cultural and economic realms. Feminism as a political theory and social movement moves around two fundamental principles. At first, it fixes its attention with “equality and justice for all women and it seeks to eliminate systems of inequality and injustice in all aspects of women’s lives” and secondly, it

¹ Corresponding author.

E-mail address: selvakumarcmf@gmail.com

“is inclusive and affirming of women; it celebrates women’s achievements and struggles and works to provide a positive and affirming stand toward women and womanhood” (Janet Lee, 10).

The origin and the growth of feminism as a movement could be traced back to 18th century, where the clamour for cultural, socio-political rights have found its articulation in the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1796) and it attained its momentum in the evolution of three waves or phases. Each wave had its own principal objectives - the first wave evolved around ‘political dimension’; the second wave focused on ‘cultural dimension’ and the third wave aimed at ‘academic dimension’ respectively. While attempting to classify the feminist movement into three phases, Kalyani Vallath in her book entitled *What About Theory? A Useful Book For The Perplexed Student* quotes Toril Moi, who in turn attempts to explain each phase with different names such as “the female (biological), the feminist (political) and the feminine (cultural)”(177) where as Elaine Showalter would speak of three phases into feminine, feminist and female.

A student who attempts to study ‘feminism’ can never bypass writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Helen Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Kate Millet and Judith Butler etc., Their contribution have caused tremendous effect in the literary arena of modern times since they were prodigious in echoing their voice for the empowerment of women across the world. In the beginning it was the women of the first world countries who were vociferous in demanding their rights than the women from the underdeveloped nations. However, it is to be noted that the emergence of writers focussing on women’s empowerment and freedom was not confined to the first world alone but there were also phenomenal writers who emerged time and again from colonized countries addressing the issues pertinent to women. As far as Nigeria is concerned when one wants to know more about women’s odds, subjugation and their yearning for freedom one could not just stop but have to fall back to the writings of Flora Nwapa (1931-1993), Zulu Sofola (1935-1995), Ifeoma Okoye (1937), Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017), Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1940-2019), Zaynab Alkali (1950) as their writings were impregnated with the ideas that pronounce the wellbeing of women and served as catalyst in securing women’s rights in equity with men.

Buchi Emecheta is acclaimed as one of the erudite women literary scholars of Africa, whose writings revolve around women and their issues. Having been born and brought up in a patriarchal setting of Igbo tribe, of Nigerian origin, her success in the world of literary arena is amazing. Among the several glorious indigenous writers of Nigeria, the worldwide acclamation and recognition that her writings have captured is a testimony to her realistic and soulful rendition. In an effort to clarify the role of literary scholars of Nigeria and especially of their tremendous contribution to the English literary writings in Nigeria, Joseph McLaren in a critique entitled “The Nigerian Novel in English: Trends and Prospects” compliments Buchi Emecheta for spearheading a prominent position in improving the writings of English novels in the line of impeccable writers like Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri, whose role have been acknowledged by the West (234). As a versatile writer, playwright, storyteller, and dramatist, she fixed her attention on exposing the exploitation and the harassment of black women, the double standard attitude of androcentric mindset, and work out effective tools and mechanisms to better the life of women. Having authored more than twenty novels pivoting around the lives of black women she understood the breadth, width, height and depth of onslaught that has been unleashed on women down through the ages.

The speciality and the uniqueness of her writings have won numerous audiences around the globe and it is testified by the very fact that her novels are translated into fourteen languages that include Dutch, French, German and Swedish (Marie Umeh, xxiii). Resurging from the gutter to the great heights of popularity by her sheer effort and indomitable spirit, she ensures that women become the centre of her enquiry as they turn out to be victims of the brutality of male chauvinism. As an impressive literary writer of women’s concern, she champions the cause of all women in general and black women specifically, both in African and Diasporic context. The distinguishing element of the celebrated novelist and her writing is of paramount importance as she registers her own personal, communitarian experiences rather than grounding them on pure fantasy and imagination.

Buchi Emecheta becomes the archetype and prototype for many writers and thinkers, and continues to serve as an inspiration for many readers across the world, especially of those who are faced with oppression, and her writings do challenge and empower them to rise above the chaotic conditions. The author having been ditched into cruel conditions like battering, sexual harassment, rape, gender and racial discrimination, and public degradation did not cow down and surrender to the patriarchal and patriarchal dominated institutional, structural and social setup, but resurged high to the peak of prominence by securing good education, honorary merits and awards and reputed Doctor of Literature degree to her credentials by sheer hard work and determination. The world of patriarchy and racial biased nations which looked down at her began to gaze at her with sense of wonder and bewilderment on her achievement and popularity. Perhaps, it underestimated the will and valour of a black woman called Buchi Emecheta, from Nigeria or failed to recognize the potentiality that the black women possess within themselves for survival. Any literary reader who reads through her novels and biography would certainly imitate her fighting spirit and persevere to survive in any volatile situations by devising and implementing dynamic strategies.

As a gifted and talented person, Buchi Emecheta ensured that her aspiration of becoming a storyteller was very dear to her heart even at her tender age and she continued to nurture the dream amidst several odds. The firmness with which she had worked hard to make her dream become a reality was something special and extraordinary of her nature. Having been inspired by the storytelling technique of her paternal aunt, Ms. Nwakwaluzo Ogbueyin, she was passionate to become a raconteur and a writer herself. It is amazing to note that a little black girl from a depraving condition, having been thrown into several hardships by her relatives and community, remained focussed and resilient to become a writer at any cost. This aptitude is visible from the fact of her confession to her teacher Miss Humble at The Methodist High School, where she boldly said that she “would like to be writer” (*Head Above Water*, 23). The subsequent reaction and cynical comments from her teacher and her companions at the school did not weaken her morale, but emboldened her further to work courageously to let the world know what Buchi Emecheta is all about.

As a prolific writer, she remained steadfast to offer a picturesque presentation of the horror and terror that the black women encounter and experience across the world at the hands of enslaving men both in Nigeria and Diaspora. She was daring to reveal the duplicity and hypocrisy of the world of patriarchy which found delight in antagonizing and harassing women for their wellbeing. She was convinced that as a writer she could change the fate and the destiny of womenfolk and bring transformation into their lives and the important role of a writer in altering the situation of women was reiterated by the prominent writer Ngugi wa Thiongo’ who said, “the product of a writer’s pen both reflects reality and also attempts to persuade us to take a certain attitude of that reality” (7).

The necessity to have a conceptual clarity on ‘patriarchy’ is justified as it is instrumental in subjugating women. Sara Gamble in her prodigious book *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* cites Chris Weedon’s description on patriarchy from “Feminist Practice and Post structural Theory” (1987) where it is said: The phrase “Patriarchal” indicates exclusively on the relations of power, where the interests of men given preference and prominence at the cost of women’s interests. It assumes numerous forms beginning with the division of labour based on sex, and the acts of procreations as an integral part of femininity through which humanity lives. The power of patriarchy prevails on the social meaning given to biological sexual difference (3). Female victimization is justified by men of oppressive and callous nature who resort to all sorts of harassment. Simon De Beauvoir who augured the worst condition for women in her book *The Second Sex* right in stating that “One is not born, but rather one becomes a woman” (qtd. In Gamble 195). Her saying implies to the twentieth century thought pattern that femininity was a social construction which further led to the severe consequences as far as women are concerned.

The necessity of unravelling the plight of women in the context of the double-standard attitude of men is justified in order to ensure that women’s emancipation would become a reality than a long cherished dream. In this endeavour, it is the woman who wriggles out in pain needs to take up the responsibility and work out her salvation since she is relegated, ignored and pushed to the periphery by

the social, cultural, political and educational system which is in the control of men. She needs to take up the mantle to run her course and succeed in all realms of life. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was right in echoing the role that woman needs to play in securing empowerment and freedom. No one would dare to fight on her behalf or stand by her in her journey towards the deliverance. When persons fail to support and circumstances does not favour it is the woman herself need to walk the talk and devise mechanisms which would support her and that's why Stanton said that "... woman herself must do this work; for women alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degradation" (Schneir, ix).

The writings of Buchi Emecheta do play a pivotal role in elucidating the agony and the anguish of black women in general and of black women of Nigeria in particular. As an erudite literary scholar, she spells out in detail the depraving condition of black women. In all her novels she does offer a beautiful composition keeping the pattern of storytelling which enables the readers to understand the agonizing situation into which the black women have been ditched for ages. Ernest Emenyonu in an article entitled "Technique and Language in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*" states that "Many of the reflections in Emecheta's novels are of her own life and the lives of people close to and around her ... and the themes of liberation, feminism, and African womanhood are favourite topics of critics and scholars of Buchi Emecheta's fictions" (252).

It is conspicuous even today that there is a biased and prejudiced notion on women and their role. They have been portrayed as weaker and feeble sex, and they have been treated as second class citizens in the world of men. Hence, recording and registering their victimization and letting know the world about their constraints and predicaments is the fundamental duty of a writer. The literary scholarship of modern time bears testimony to the contribution of Buchi Emecheta, who played a paramount role in exposing the hypocrisy of Nigerian men and the patriarchal system which coerced women into constant harassment and addressing matters that concern women's emancipation. While addressing the ordeals of women in the hands of men with the oppressive mindset, Eustace Palmer states,

Male chauvinism is surely at its peak in traditional society where females are regarded by males as little better than goods and chattels. If they are wives, then their main use is as vehicles for procreating children, thus immortalizing the husband's name and ensuring the continuity of his line; if they are daughters, the fathers' only interest in them relates to the amount of money they will bring into his coffers in the form of bride price. (22)

In the world of man's dominion demanding the rights for woman is never going to be an easy task and all the more when one strives for women's emancipation he or she would bound to face backlash and be looked with aversion and suspicion. Therefore, feminist writings do face criticism from misogynists. However, Buchi Emecheta despite knowing the criticisms that would be levelled against her writings she did emphasize her role as a feminist writer and the concerns of women occupy the central writings of her novels. While articulating Buchi Emecheta's stand as feminist writer, Pauline Ada Uwakweh in her article entitled "To Ground The Wandering Muse: A Critique Of Buchi Emecheta's Feminism" quotes Emecheta's own words as follows:

I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, 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 an African feminist with a small 'f'. (395)

Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo in her critique on "Tradition and the African Female Writer: The Example of Buchi Emecheta" labels that "Emecheta is first and foremost an African feminist" (6) and quotes Carole Boyce Davies, whose statement asserts that "African feminism examines societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment" (6). It is remarkable to notice that Buchi Emecheta invariably in all her novels does the same thing by portraying women's

experience, debunking all the false notions that have been erroneously articulated for women and she does not fail to examine the social, cultural, economic and political realities of women, and is concerned to lead them to have their own heyday. Ezenwa- Ohaeto in an article entitled “Replacing Myth with Myth: The Feminist Streak in Buchi Emecheta’s *Double Yoke*” articulates that “the revival of female consciousness is ... one of the most significant trends in the development of the African novel” (156) and Ohaeto also quotes Eldred Jones, who spells out that “the emergence of a very powerful feminist streak” (156) is found in the writings of illustrious women novelists like “Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba and Rebeka Njau” (157).

2. Conclusion

The feminist ideas that permeate in the novels of Buchi Emecheta, especially through her characters in the novels such as *Second Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Double Yoke* (1982), and *The Family* (1990) do lay emphasis on women emancipation. The protagonist Adah in *Second Class Citizen* resurges with resilience against the onslaught of her selfish, cruel and hedonistic husband. Her hardworking nature and dynamic strategies help her in the pursuit of survival amidst chaotic and catastrophic condition in the United Kingdom. In *The Bride Price*, the chief character Aku-nna struggles against the patriarchal Igbo community and its enslaving system. The story presents in totality the inhuman condition into which Aku-nna struggles and survives through education. *The Slave Girl* revolves around the real life story of Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta Emecheta, the mother of the novelist. It offers the pitiable plight of a little girl who is sold into slavery by her brother and who in turn amidst unfavourable circumstances raises high to search her freedom and homeland. In *Double Yoke* the author spells out the story of Nnu Ego who is caught in the web of tradition and modernity and who is ravaged by heartless men and thrives for survival. *The Family* encompasses the real life incident of Gwendolen Brillianton, a Jamaican girl, who is put into ordeals on account of poverty and illiteracy and how she carves out emancipatory strategies.

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