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BUCHI EMECHETA'S FEMINISM OF SELFHOOD: SELF-CONCEPT, GENDER, MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY

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Abstract: Today, there is a multiplicity of intriguing, complicated and complex feminisms in the globe that has resulted from individual women's search for answers to their peculiar experiences, advocacy for general improvement in women's conditions, as well as search for models of women's empowerment to counter power differentials between males and females. This essay will focus on Buchi Emecheta's Feminism of Selfhood inherent in her 1988 Stockholm pronouncement on gender, her notions of self-concept and self-identity, and her consequent, complex views on homosexuality, same-sex and heterosexual marriages. The entire body of Emecheta's writings, along with her penchant for the literary device of irony for heavy emphatic effect, will constitute materials and sources of investigation. Also to be examined are the complexities that have arisen from critics' unawareness or misunderstanding of the impact of lived experiences on the author's writings and interviews, which have colored her feminist ideology and opinions on sexuality. Ultimately, this essay will posit that Emecheta's Feminism of Selfhood motivates the eminent author's support for the betrayed, victims of social, political, cultural and economic injustices wallowing in poverty, not the least of whom are women and females, everybody's fools that she urges subtly by her personal example to stand up for their human rights and their social and economic interests, and thereby assume their own agency for change, freedom and power.

Keywords: Feminisms, advocacy, empowerment, power, freedom, change, gender

INTRODUCTION

> 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' 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. [1] -- *Buchi Emecheta*

CLEARLY, BUCHI EMECHETA'S FEMINISM OF Selfhood comes from her own lived experiences, as well as her interest in the inner lives and

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struggles of women she knew closely and with whom she interacted. Her travails in her marriage to a man that gave her five children, but did not brook her desire for liberty to achieve self-fulfillment, guided her reaction and teachings to several distressed women.[2] Her husband had burned the manuscript of her first novel, declaring that a woman under his roof was not allowed to write. By his stance and gesture, Emecheta's husband denied her inalienable rights to her body and spirit, her right to the pursuit of happiness in whatever way she chose to do so, and forced her to strike out as a single mother alone with her five children. First, she separated from her husband, and then she divorced him, affirming that a lack of marriage was better than a bad marriage, and adding that a broken home was a stigma only if you decided that it was. Curiously, her determination to take her destiny into her hands took her husband by surprise. As their son, Sylvester Onwordi, reported, "She surprised him with a separation and set about raising her five small children alone while studying at night for a Sociology degree and working by day as an administrator at the British Museum."[3] In assuming her agency to end a marriage that was not working for her, Emecheta turned her impediments into hope and strength for herself, becoming thereby a model for other women in similar predicaments in her indigenous setting and beyond. Furthermore, she demonstrated that women needed their own money and their own house to be able to challenge situations attributed to them that they did not like.

Hence, the individual more than the collectivity has the power to carve out a place for self in life. Marriage is not good, if it is a one-way situation that paid the man in good dividends, but left the woman empty-handed, affirms Emecheta. She connects the ills of patriarchy and sexism to social injustice, male domination, and women's subordination and economic inferiority, violence, and abuse. Without economic means, she further notes, women cannot ward off violence towards them in the society, let alone the attendant sexual abuses of rape and incest in domestic spheres. Indeed, the controversies about Emecheta's life, her artistic presentation of characters in her writings, and her pronouncements in general at interviews and other outlets mirror her affirmation that women need to be empowered to stand up for themselves, their rights and interests.

In the excerpt at the beginning of this essay, Emecheta formally proffers her controversial views on gender, marriage, hetero- and homosexuality, and same-sex marriage at the Second African Women's Conference in Stockholm, Sweden. Thereafter, her feminism would challenge conventions, acknowledge that biological determinism is unshakeable, while still observing that there exist various degrees of maleness and femaleness beyond intersex children, meaning, those not clearly born with the male or the female sex organ. Therefore, division of labor along sex lines with-

out due consideration of the gender factor is a mistake, she affirms, a mistake that is the root cause of violent interactions between men and women in the institutions of family, workplace, and systems of government. She argues that males and females have the ability to cross gender lines when necessary and should also be countenanced and supported. Nonetheless, she affirms intriguingly that same-sex relationships and intra-gender sexual desire (read homosexuality), are deviances. Observe that Emecheta's life history mirrors this misnomer as well, for she lived the better part of her adult life as a female head of her family, meaning, a *de facto* male. This apparent incongruity in the author's self-identity, and this ambiguity of her life as a female-male, what her Igbo people would call an Agụnwanyị, has proven difficult for many an unaware critic to properly understand. At her death in February 2017, Niyi Osundare surmised, lauded thus her rich but complex and conflicting life:

> The world has just suffered the sad, irreplaceable loss of a woman who willed herself into significance; a writer who literally wrote each work with blood from her veins. Buchi Emecheta pressed the abundance of life's challenges into the richness of art, producing some of the most frequently cited works in contemporary literature.[4]

Emecheta's biography states in part that in the 1960s when she was growing up in Nigeria, women had few rights as daughters, wives or mothers. Orphaned early, and thrown from one extended family member to another in Lagos, she found solace in the company of a fellow student, Sylvester Onwordi, who was six years older than her. Onwordi later went to England for higher education. When he sent for Emecheta to join him, she went happily. They married and started a family right away, making a baby literally every year, to the extent that by her twenty-second birthday the couple already had all their five children. Trouble started when Onwordi's ego got in the way; he could not brook her independence as a working wife pursuing higher education and writing. The last straw that broke the camel's back was when the jealous husband burned the manuscript of what would have been her first novel. Emecheta decided that she had had enough of domestic problems and strove to free herself from her unhappy marriage. She struck out, taking all their five small children with her. In that radical stance, biography met activism and the narrative eye turned a true-life story into fiction. Buchi Emecheta's second child and first son, Sylvester Onwordi (named after his father), states in a Tribute to his mother at her death:

> She used to tell us as children that if you believed in yourself strongly enough then you[5] could make any dream come true. It was almost an

> article of faith with her, one that made her the forceful character she became, but which also rendered her impatient with people who were less driven than she. When her schoolteacher beat her in front of the class for announcing that she wanted to be a writer, she bore the pain in silence and became more determined than ever to make her dream a reality. Years later, in the UK, when her husband burned the handwritten manuscript of her first novel, she again quietly determined that she would find her own way.[6]

Emecheta's autobiographical trilogy, *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) and *Head Above Water* (1986), portray the writer's difficulty understanding how women are so complacent about their self-concept, self-esteem and dignity that they take all insults and abuses with submission. The first two novels, In *the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*, would later be republished as *Ada's Story* in 1983 by Allison and Busby. A large part of *In the Ditch* had earlier serialized in the *New Statesman* magazine the story of a young and single mother in London raising her children alone and in poverty. The sequel, *Second-Class Citizen*, continues the travails of the heroine, Ada, fighting poverty, gender discrimination and racism in a society that seeks to label her and her family as a problem family, due to their dependence on social welfare benefits to make ends meet. And in *Head above Water*, the third novel, Emecheta disapproves of the double enslavement of the African woman, who "stooped and allowed the culture of her people to enslave her, and then permitted Christianity to tighten the knot of enslavement!"[7] Dogged, Emecheta later reconstructed the burnt manuscript and published it as *The Bride Price*, which won the New Statesman/Jack Campbell Award and the Sunrise Award for the Best Black Writer in the World.

Eventually, Emecheta's writings enlarge in their scope beyond herself, becoming universal stories of women in the world facing the problems of poverty and oppression. The longer the black women from various countries of the world reside abroad away from their original homes the more identical their problems become, for there is not much difference between the situations and conditions of African and Caribbean women in London. In *Gwendolen* (1989), for example, the eponymous heroine suffers racism and unresolved self-identity, due to her West Indian origin in a neighborhood of predominantly white people in London. Then, Kehinde of the novel *Kehinde* (1994), is doubly betrayed by her husband, who leaves her in London, goes back to Nigeria, and marries another wife that is more to his taste, a wife that is docile, weak, and submissive.

At a time when men wrote mainly, not women yet, they saw women consistently as weak and property to men in their writings. *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta's novel with an ironic title taken from the end of

Flora Nwapa's first novel, *Efuru*, deplores the unfair gender oppression of women. Emecheta criticizes marriage by compulsion and motherhood as the only female way to fulfillment as a human being. She celebrates womanhood freed from the yokes of wifehood and motherhood. The heroines Nnụ Ego and Adaku of *The Joys of Motherhood* are often cited by critics as divergent mirrors of women's travails under the yoke of rigid traditions and customs, not to mention puns in the game that men construct to benefit themselves. In Ibusa of those days, a man dies and the younger brother of the dead man inherits his sister-in-law in a levirate customary marriage. The widow, anxious to keep all her children in the family, allows herself to be married a second time to her brother-in-law. Then, intra-female hostility between the senior wife and the younger newcomer wife ensues, as Charlotte Bruner narrates in an excerpt from *The Joys of Motherhood*, ironically titled "A Man Needs Many Wives."[8] Adakụ is the much younger woman that comes up from Ibusa to Lagos after the death of her husband determined to be inherited by her brother-in-law Nnaife, the husband of Nnụ Ego. Beautiful and abraisive, Adaku had lived a life of submission to her dead husband and his extended family in Ibusa. On the contrary, the rather independent wife, Nnụ Ego, residing in the modern city of Lagos, shares the family financial burden with her husband. Overnight, she faces the intolerable situation of having to share her husband with another woman, according to Ibusa custom. She does not want to go against custom or appear to be a "bad woman" that does not share what she has. As the communal lifestyle demands, she should always be seen to be a "good woman," which appellation includes being ready to share her husband. Emecheta minutely captures all the emotions in flux as a result of this sordid situation between the militant and forceful Adakụ and the subdued and reflective Nnụ Ego. The climax of their saga in the dying paragraph of the excerpt is when Nnụ Ego in spite of herself must give up her bed to her rival and husband to consummate their levirate marriage. Nnụ Ego must try to sleep through this ordeal, knowing that Nnaife her husband and Adakụ her new rival are surely laughing at her for her loss. Nnaife could hardly wait for Nnụ Ego to settle down before he pulled Adakụ into the only bed in the one-bedroom flat. The narrative voice states:

> It was a good thing she had prepared herself, because Adaku turned out to be one of those shameless modern women whom Nnu Ego did not like. What did she think she was doing? Did she think Nnaife was her lover and not her husband, to show her enjoyment so? She tried to block her ears, yet could still hear Adaku's exaggerated carrying on. Nnu Ego tossed in agony and anger all night, going through in her imagination what was taking place behind the curtained bed. Not that she had to do much imagining, because even when she tried to ignore

> what was going on, Adaku would not let her. She giggled, she squeaked, she cried and she laughed in turn, until Nnu Ego was quite convinced that it was all for her benefit. At one point Nnu Ego sat bolt upright looking at the shadows of Nnaife and Adaku. No, she did not have to imagine what was going on; Adaku made sure she knew.
>
> When Nnu Ego could stand it no longer, she shouted at Oshia who surprisingly was sleeping through it all: "Oshia, stop snoring!"
>
> There was silence from the bed, and then a burst of laughter. Nnu Ego could have bitten her tongue off; what hurt her most was hearing Nnaife remark: "My senior wife cannot go to sleep. You must learn to accept your pleasures quietly, my new wife Adaku. Your senior wife is like a white lady: she does not want noise." Nnu Ego bit her teeth into her baby's night clothes to prevent herself from screaming.[9]

We have quoted the above excerpt at length partly to show that the perceptive narrative voice did not miss any part of Nnụ ego's lament and partly to bear witness to Emecheta's profound knowledge of the sufferings of women she knows and to whom she consistently gives voice to tell their stories. Nonetheless, she reiterates that many men are constrained to be inhuman by immoral customs and traditions that sanction violence, abuse, and brutality. Her writings bring admirably to the fore themes of suffering, abuse and violence. Added to her ability to capture the subtlety of emotions is her advocacy for women to put on their cloak of strength and boldness as individuals and enlightened persons and find a new and comfortable way for themselves. They must not merely seek to survive, as Nnụ Ego tries to do. On the contrary, they must also seek to endure as Adakụ does.

Clearly, in the past women had few rights, had low self-esteem and lacked self confidence, bogged down as they were by the customs and mores of the traditional cultural system that did not allow them to strive for their self-fulfillment. Emecheta argues that there is no reason for the status quo to continue unabated. She empowers individual women to support and improve themselves and challenge oppressive traditions and customs. *The Slave Girl*, for example, encourages women to be bold and brave enough to leave a marriage with a man that fails to support their human dignity and integrity. Employing her characteristic literary device of irony, the author jabs at the custom of marriage that posits the woman as a trophy to be won by the man. Unless a critic is attentive and reading between the lines he or she might miss the irony embedded in this so-called explanation of how and why Nigerian men embrace polygyny, with good reason:

> But years later, Nigerian men solved the problem themselves. A woman could be taken to church and a ring slipped on her finger as easily as a piece of string round a man's cattle to mark it out from another person's. But that did not mean that the man could have only her. What if he has enough money and could afford more wives, or if the first one married in church had no child? So men would simply take wives when they felt like it; while women on the other hand, must have one husband and only one.[10]

It is with such a writing style that Emecheta strove to hide the fact that is only too glaring to the insightful critical reader that she is a feminist.

Certainly, from this angle of vision, Emecheta's feminism is not minuscule by any means. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie has criticized Emecheta, and by extension some other early African women writers, for their timidity to take the risk of proclaiming their feminism at the time. For denying their feminism, even when their life's work were intrinsically feminist, Leslie opined:

> 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.[11]

Observe that Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, for her part, has attempted to reclaim herself in an interview by Maria Frias, pointing out that feminism and lesbianism are not the same, are different from each other:

> I cannot understand why people think that if you write about women you should be a feminist. Now that I have been called the foremost African feminist, it is a bit awkward for me when African critics who do not want to take that I am a feminist write such things about me because really, that is wishful thinking. They don't want to say I'm a feminist, and I suspect that is because people have not clarified the whole issue of lesbianism, and where it impinges on feminism. And I genuinely think that when they say I am not a feminist, they are saying: Oh, she cannot be because feminists are lesbians. It is there, unspoken. Because how more loudly should I declare my feminism? But I always make it clear that feminism is an ideological view point. Lesbianism is a sexual orientation, and the two should not be mixed at all. But people do not want to deal with the dichotomy, the difference. In

> Africa people just cringe, but feminism has nothing to do with lesbianism.[12]

It is noteworthy that Emecheta raises a vital issue about sexuality, sexual orientation and marriage connected to the afore-mentioned feminism-lesbian dichotomy in an epoch when such ideas were not yet openly discussed. First, by justifying her stance on marriage as a complementary relationship that can take place only between a man and a woman, she opens a Pandora's Box . Second, implicitly, she denies thereby the possibility of same-sex marriage, and sees same-sex romantic relationship as unnatural and a choice that one makes.[13] Observe that Buchi Emecheta is not an exception among those that hold a similar opinion, for many schools of thought still do see homosexuality as an aberration and a deviance. Lately, some other indigenous African feminist theorists have accounted in their different ways for women's conditions in particular situations in their cultures, countries and genders.[14] Evidently, gender and sexuality are fluid constructs, which can change every day and throughout the days of one's life.

Emecheta's creative writing embraces a male culture, in the sense that she uses her pen and paper to canvass for women's liberty and freedom from oppression. Just as in the past when men only wrote, her writing would become a platform for and a means of struggle for the improvement of the living conditions of females and women. Indeed, her creative writing links women's concerns to a form of activism:

> I am just an ordinary writer, an ordinary writer who has to write, because if I didn't write I think I would have to be put in an asylum. Some people have to communicate, and I happen to be one of them. I have tried several times to take university appointments and work as a critic, but each time I have packed up and left without giving notice. I found that I could not bring myself to criticize other people's work.[15]

In *The Bride Prize*, a novel that deals with traditional issues facing women and men, both Chike and Akụnna suffer under traditional customs and mores established along rigid sex lines that limit and demean them as human beings. They spend the entire space of the novel struggling to break free and regain their freedom and independence. Akụnna is oppressed in her heterosexual marriage to Chike. Chike, though a man, is also oppressed. It is noteworthy that Buchi Emecheta's personal journey, from a married mother of five to a single mother fending for herself and her children, alone, demonstrates her belief in the fluidity of gender. Akụnna and Chike, therefore, have a chance to emulate the author and

remedy themselves, through abandoning a marriage that is not working for either of them.

Buchi Emecheta also connects the ills of patriarchy to militarism. At the beginning, Western feminism tended to exclude women from other regions of the world, particularly Third World women, who could not identify with this movement as it was affirmed by mostly white women at the time. Third World feminists at the time saw a big rift between them and the other groups of privileged and influential women, whose domineering stance and penchant for speaking for and to the Third World women were akin to their male counterparts subjugating women under the umbrella of patriarchy and through other sexist behaviors.[16] Emecheta is averse to Western feminists' thinking that no one else had heard about and performed feminism before them.[17] That was the moment she, a feminist of the small "f" differentiated herself from the Western Feminists of the big "F"! Living in England opened her senses to the evils of racism, sexism, patriarchy, and all sorts of gender discriminations and oppressions. Elsewhere, Ada Uzoamaka Azodo has clarified Third World women's predicament at the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and colonization and its effects.[18] Continuing, Azodo opines:

> Buchi Emecheta had a good laugh on a man who thought he knew Nwapa very well as a serious woman who did not want to wallow into the feminist debate, when Buchi knew that feminists were paying for Nwapa's visits to London to give talks. Even then, Buchi described herself as a feminist with a small f.[19]

Implicitly, Emecheta acknowledges that there are a variety of forms of feminism to suit individual agendas.[20] Ironically, almost sarcastically, she asks, while disapproving of many African men's attitude towards their women:

> 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.[21]

It is unfortunate that critic Olawale Taju Ajayi completely misses the point here; he misconstrues Emecheta's ironical jabs at men who arrogate to themselves the titles of Lord and Master as an endorsement of men's patriarchal feelings and practice of superiority:

> 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.[22]

Olawale Taju Ajayi totally misses the authorial irony, when he says the exact opposite of what Emecheta means and would like to see happening between men and women of Ibusa. The truth of the statement is that Emecheta ridicules the so-called 'idela happy marriage' in which the man has it all and the woman comes away with literally nothing. Observe that through the mouth of her persona, Nnụ Ego, Emecheta at once condemns and ridicules the kind of men that Nnaife portrays. Nnaife - sends back - meagre sixty pounds to support his family over a period of three years during his posting as infantry soldier in Burma. Gone are the real men that our writer and author knew, men like Amatokwu and Agbadi, men who farmed the land and hunted in the forests for bushmeat to feed their families, men whose productivity was measured by their ability to feed their families as farmers rather than as soldiers killing people in a foreign war. A fact that Ajayi also misses is that Nnaife himself in the excerpt with an ironical title, "A Man Needs Many Wives," is also a victim of patriarchal traditions and colonialism, which are in a sense two sides of the same coin. Ajayi does not see either that Nnụ ego is uncomfortable with her new status and disapproving of her lot as a senior wife. Emecheta's radical feminist brand may not proclaim itself from the rooftop, however, it is there implicitly and subtly for the intelligent and deep thinker to perceive. Through the use of irony, and given the times in which she wrote, she made attempts to minimize her advocacy for women's rights and gender equality and equity.

In the novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta takes head-on motherhood. She does not endorse motherhood as the be-all-and-end-all of a woman's life. The reader learns that Uhamiri, the Goddess of the River, gives beauty, fame, and wealth to women, but not children. This is despite the fact that in actual life, where she is worshipped in Oguta, the goddess is married and gives children to women. Obviously, Nwapa's fictionalized version of Uhamiri is not married and does not give children, because the writer sees husbands and children as encumbrances for women. By the same token, the principal character, Nnụ Ego, suffers exceedingly for her utter devotion to her husband and children. In the end, she loses everything, to the point that she dies of heartbreak in the middle of a village pathway, having been abandoned by all, even the two sons she spent her entire life raising with devotion. She had been so engrossed in

motherhood that she failed to make friends for herself. First, she is abused and abandoned by her husband. Then, her two boys go abroad for higher education and little by little forget her, too. It all begins with their letters that are no longer as frequent as they used to be, until they stop completely, because the two sons marry white women in Canada and are not in the least enchanted about returning with them to Ibusa. They do not remember their mother anymore. Emecheta castigates the institution of marriage that makes children forget their parents, when she asks, with her tongue in cheek, of course, "Have you heard of a complete woman without a husband?[23] A little later, now empowered, Nnụ Ego responds eloquently to her own question, by claiming equality with her man, whereas at the earlier part of the novel she is portrayed as a weak and subjugated wife and mother. Now she speaks from a position of strength, no longer of weakness. In one of her unguarded moments, she taunts Nnaife in a statement that one can only attribute to a person with a radical feminist leaning, saying, "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."[24] Nnụ Ego has finally learned her lessons. Take note that her mother, Ọna, never married her father, although she had children for him. Ọna's father, Nwokọcha Agbadi, had decreed that her daughter would not stoop to any man in marriage, for marriage invariably turned a strong daughter into a weak wife and mother. Head-strong Ọna, despite Nnụ Ego's father's entreaties, does not bow to marriage with Nnụ Ego's father. What is more, in spite of her status as a concubine, she makes love to him so noisily in the Obi that the women married in the compound hear her amorous carryings-on with their common husband. This is quite contrary to expectations with traditional women, to say the least.

Evidently, Emecheta's feminism does not brook the abuse of women in any form or shape. Nnụ Ego's stance in *The Joys of Motherhood* can be seen as her example that ordinary women can use to stand up to abuse and endeavor to get on with life when one cannot take it anymore. This is progressivist feminism, a brand of feminism that embraces advocacy for women. Nnụ Ego speaks on this issue:

> I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? The men make 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.[25]

Emecheta's progressivist ideas, when extended internationally beyond Africa, embrace Womanism and other forms of feminism in the global world. Emecheta states:

> I am just an ordinary writer who has to write. 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 woman 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. I do believe in the African kind of feminism. They call it Womanism.[26]

Emecheta continues to distance herself from Western Feminism, though, reiterating that she is rooted in Africa and African women. Her Womanism caters to the African woman, and takes into account her culture, religion, economic status, power and gender relations in her living environment. As Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi earlier opined, it is a commitment to the survival and wholeness of males and females in the society.[27] From that angle of vision, Womanist concerns also dovetail into postcolonial preoccupations and African issues in modern times.[28] For example, Nnụ Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* loathes the very idea that her husband cuts grass as a manual laborer at the railway for a living. She thinks it is a form of slave work for white masters who pay him a paltry monthly salary. Then, she attributes his flabby physique, like most Ibusa men in Lagos in service to white colonialists, to the wasting away of Africa continent, symbolized by African manhood by the white colonialists. African men in Lagos pale physically when she compares them to the wiry men in form and physique of the village of Ibusa, farmers and hunters that do manual work for themselves and to feed and maintain their families. The feminization of African men in Lagos must stop, seems to opine Emecheta, while she sings praises to the Ibusa man in the village:

> He belonged to the clear sun, the bright moon, to his farm and his rest hut, where he could sense a nestling cobra, a scuttling scorpion, a howling hyena. Not here. Not in this place, this square room painted completely white like a place of sacrifice, this place where men's flesh hung loose on their bodies all day long.[29]

After this demonstration of poetic eloquence in comparing and contrasting the Ibusa men of the city and the village, no critic may rightly argue that Emecheta does not care about the male condition, in addition to her criticism of the treatment they mete to the womenfolk. In other words, the women and their men are all victims as well of the imperial exploitation.

The novels with eloquent titles, *Kehinde*, *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen*, chronicle their heroines' sordid ordeals at the hands of their men in the foreign lands of the West. Clearly, Emecheta has moved on from her early beginnings, for in postcolonial times, women have their own identities and opinions on issues of national concern. Ada in *Second Class Citizen* is aware of her abuse at the hands of her husband, through mingling with middle-class white women in London. She loathes the part that Christian missionaries play in keeping women down and subjugated: "Those god-forsaken missionaries! They had taught Ada all the niceties of life. They had taught her by the Bible that a woman was supposed to be ready to give in to the man at any time…!"[30] Then, Adah finds herself "in the ditch," after she is forced to abandon her matrimonial and abusive home andstrike out alone to fend for herself and her children. She encounters racism and sexism at the petty jobs she does to make ends meet, while also taking evening classes in sociology at university to prepare for a better future for herself and her children. In *Kehinde*, the eponymous heroine shuttles between the West and Africa, and finds the practice of polygyny abhorring and demeaning to women. Later on, Gwendolen in *Gwendolen* would extrapolate on the black experience in London within the Jamaican neighborhoods. There, men are used for white amusement and benefit. In a vicious cycle typical of the oppressed, the Caribbean women are also used by the lower working-class black men in their lives. As Emecheta insinuates in a biting irony, the black men themselves are also abused:

> Life would have been easier if they were all kept that way, in picturesque ignorance from which they could be called upon to display their physical agility in sports or to wail their fate in low haunting melodies, for the amusement of all.[31]

The non-Igbo names that Emecheta gives to the heroines of these later novels, such as Gwendolen, Kehinde, and Debbie in *Destination Biafra*, exemplify women's strong sense of self, for the names represent the writer and her personas' courage to assume other identities they feel comfortable with, not just what they were born with ethnically or what they assumed as they experienced life in their own locale, as did Ada. In *Destination Biafra*, women at war in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict dare to dream of a utopian Biafra that will succeed as an independent Republic from Nigeria; they mirror a yearning for justice, fairness, and freedom from oppression. In the autobiographical *Head above Water*, Emecheta does not understand how women are so complacent about their self-identity esteem and dignity, just how a woman "still stooped and allowed the culture of her people to enslave her, and then permitted Christianity to tighten the knot of enslavement![32] Whereas the male, the man is in the center as a person, a sub-

ject and an agent, even the Alpha and Omega, the Lord and Master,[33] the female, the woman cast as the "Other" is in the periphery as an object of verbal, sexual and physical abuse, a non-person, a non-subject and a non-agent. According to custom, she is dismissible, diminished, belittled, subjugated and subordinated.[34] After all, she is a "woman," the opposite of a "man." She has no worth or value[35] and so is to be denigrated. As a feminine person, she is lesser than a masculine person. The male is expected to work and often goes off on adventures far away from home, bringing back money and goods. On the contrary, the female hovers around the home, producing and rearing children, and occasionally earning a support salary from petty trading in candles, matches, soaps and blue, peanuts and bread, kerosene in a kiosk, all day long and into the night in front of the house, as Nnụ Ego does. Her role is to support her husband in a marriage relationship where the power position is separated and effective (or ineffective) as the Poles and the Antipodes. Real power resides with the male as a man. He controls the social, economic, and political spheres, dispensing of the female at his whim and caprice. The female or woman must not seek personal laurels or successes for herself.

Feminism for Buchi Emecheta, therefore, is not just a metaphysical issue, for she condemns the male view of the self and reclaims female identities. She conceptualizes the self as a dynamic individual relating to her unconscious desires, as well as attempting social prescriptions of her culture of origin at the intersection of several and multiple layers of phenomena. In a way, Buchi Emecheta chronicles Igbo foremothers in her stories and reenacts what women all over the world go through in their own particular situations in their own locales.[36] It is difficult to understand why such a writer whose titles of books, ironical or not, speak eloquently of her passionate and psychological preoccupations would attribute the epithet of smallness to her feminist identity when her feminist ideology is anything but small. Emecheta may not have written theoretically or shown exclusive concern for females, yet her writings are decidedly feminist. She presents society and cultures as they truly are. She describes her writings as her children, adding that she has no favorites among her books. Furthermore, she states, they are merely a means for expressing her culture to those who know little or nothing about its customs and mores: "Apart from telling stories, I don't have a particular mission. I like to tell the world our part of the story while using voices of women."

CONCLUSION

Clearly, Buchi Emecheta felt fulfilled practicing her profession as a creative writer, much more than she did as a critic;[37] she fought and advocated for women and men. Her Feminism of Selfhood is the struggle for self-

worth and value as human beings on behalf of women. She fought domestic violence in her personal life and, through the characters she created in her fiction, promoted social justice, women's economic empowerment, women's health and reproductive rights.[38] Emecheta fought for women's economic power, so that women could choose not to remain in abusive marriages.[39] She fought for gender equality in the home, in the workplace and in the public and political spheres, to liberate women from the yoke of patriarchy. She fought for women to earn wages and hold political seats in government, to lighten the load of poverty on them. Men must be persuaded, she argued, to give up some of their power and to join the struggle to empower and dignify more women.[40] She did not believe that women should be treated as property or as pariahs. She did not condone seeing women who protest their subordination and oppression and those who refuse to be mere objects of sexual pleasure of the men as radicals to be avoided or never to be married. From that angle of vision, Emecheta was an androgynous personality, a perfect blend of feminine and masculine qualities thatflowed effortlessly with fluidity and ease, aggression and nurturance, as the situation dictated, from male to female tasks and back. Emecheta was, indeed, a model for many a female and woman to emulate.

POSTSCRIPT

A prolific writer of more than twenty novels and the publisher of Ogwugwu Afọr Publishing Company,[41] with a B.Sc in Sociology in 1972 and an M.Phil in 1976 from London University, Emecheta received several literary awards,[42] including The Daughter of Mark Twain Award for *Second-Class Citizen*, New Statesman/Jack Campbell Award for *The Slave Girl*, Sunrise Award for the Best Black Writer in the World, and also for *The Slave Girl*, and the Best British Writer's Award for *The Joys of Motherhood*. In 1979, she became a member of the Home Secretary's Advisory Council on Race. In 1983, she was selected as one of the twenty Best of Young British Writers by the Book Marketing Council. She lectured in the United States throughout 1979 as Visiting Professor at a number of universities and returned to Nigeria in 1980 as Senior Research Fellow and Visiting Professor of English at the University of Calabar. In 1982, she lectured at Yale University and the University of London. In 1982, her Ogwugwu Afọr Publishing Company provided a platform and financial support for Black artists. From 1982 to 1983, she was a member of the British Arts

Council and was a regular contributor to the *New Statesman*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Guardian* before her death. In 1986, she held a fellowship at the University of London. Upon Emecheta's death, British-Nigerian novelist Bernardine Evaristo described her as "an incredibly important" figure in the history of British literature. *The Joys of Motherhood*, she opined "is a scorching portrayal of a woman's life in pre-independence Nigeria," adding that Emecheta "should be up there as the female, feminist counterpart to Chinua Achebe's celebrated and widely taught novel *Things Fall Apart*." In *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, Editor Marie Umeh states that "Emecheta's treatment of sexual politics in her society is grounded in Igbo women's protest against retrogressive cultural norms, such as clitoridectomy, women as baby machines, the prioritising of boys at the expense of girls, and widow inheritance." With the British society, the African continent and the African Diaspora vying for ownership of Florence Buchi Emecheta, with just reasons, future scholarship on Emecheta might well be to decipher whether she was a Nigerian writer or a British novelist. No matter on which side the scale tilts, Florence Onyebuchi Emecheta was an Africulturist that understood African cultures and the place of the African woman in them. She encouraged women to break out of their shackles and fetters, not merely to survive, but to endure as agents of their own freedom andsalvation.

NOTES

[1] Kirsten H. Peterson, "Criticism and Ideology,) Second African Women's Conference, Stockholm, Sweden, 1988. (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988): 173-181.

[2] Sylvester Onwordi was her husband's name.

[3] Remembering my mother Buchi Emecheta, 1944-2017 (newstatesman.com) Accessed 06/27/2022.

[4] "Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017). *Sun News Online*, February 3, 2017. Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) – The Sun Nigeria (sunnewsonline.com) Accessed 06/27/2022.

[5] Remembering my mother Buchi Emecheta, 1944-2017 (newstatesman.com) Accessed 06/27/2022.

[6] *New Statesman* Magazine, January 31, 2017.

[7] Buchi Emecheta, *Head Above Water*, Chapter 3.

[8] Charlotte H. Bruner, ed. *Unwinding Threads: Writings by Women in Africa*. "A Man needs Many Wives" by Buchi Emecheta: pp. 49-61.

[9] Charlotte H. Bruner, Ed. *Unwinding Threads: Writings by Women in Africa*. "A Man needs Many Wives" by Buchi Emecheta, 61.

[10] *Slave Girl*, 173.

[11] Olawale Taju Ajayi,. "Buchi Emecheta: Beyond the Task and the Mask. *In the Perspectives of Language and Literature: Essays in Honour of R.U. Uzoezie The Guardian*, 1983.

[12] An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo: "I Learnt my First Feminist Lessons in Africa" by Maria Frias. Edited by Lourdes Lopez Ropero and Isabel Diaz Sanchez.

Special Issue on *New Literatures in English. Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses,* No. 6, November, 2003: 30.

[13] Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, and Maureen Eke, *Gender and Sexuality in African Literature and Film*, (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2007).

[14] Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, "*Feminisms in Africa and the African Diaspora: Ideology, Gender, and Development,*" Special Issue. *OFO: Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol 5, Nos. 1 & 2, (2015).

[15] Buchi Emecheta (Essay Date 1988) Source: Buchi Emecheta, "Feminism with a Small 'f'!" In *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference*, edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen. Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988, pp. 173-85.
"In the following essay, Emecheta discusses her artistic concerns and feminist perspective. As Emecheta illustrates, African feminism differs significantly from Western feminism due to the distinct cultural values and sexual identity of African women." (Research Emecheta, Buchi | Feminism in Literature (bookrags.com) Accessed 06/28/2022.

[16] Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, "Feminisms in Africa and the African Diaspora: Ideology, Gender and Development," *OFO: Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2, (2015): 28.

[17] Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 35-72.

[18] Ada Uzoamaka Azodo."Marxist feminism grapples with the triple oppression of women in matters of gender, race and class, but not always with success given the variety of women in the world concerned, women who are not all at the same economic status or have had other and same experiences of life. No wonder many African women writers have distanced themselves from feminism as such, even when what they do is clearly feminist. Flora Nwapa, for example, rejected the label, contenting herself with defining herself merely as a woman who knows something about the lives of women she writes about." (*OFO: Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2, 2015: 28-9).

[19] Ada Uzoamaka Azodo. "Di-Feminism, an Indigenous Feminist Theory with Broad Claims for Ndi Igbo." In: *OFO: Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 & 2, 2015: 13-63.

[20] This is a similar opinion to Buchi Emecheta's. According to Virginia Wolfe, there is "No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself."

[21] The *Joys of Motherhood*, 71.

[22] Ajayi , Olawale Taju. "Buchi Emecheta: Beyond the Task and the Mask." In: *The Perspectives of Language and Literature: Essays in Honour of R.U. Uzoezie*: p. 371.

[23] The *Joys of Motherhood,* p. 158. In such circumstances, how could Ajayi have thought that Emecheta approved of women's submission to men and the traditional mores that limited the woman's usefulness and fulfillment to her wifehood and motherhood?

[24] The *Joys of Motherhood*, 206. Again, how could Ajayi have thought that Emecheta approved of women's submission to men and the traditional mores that limited the woman's usefulness and fulfillment to her wifehood and motherhood?

[25] The *Joys of Motherhood*, 187.

[26] Buchi Emecheta, "Feminism with a Small 'f'!" In *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference,* edited by Kirsten Holst Petersen. Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988, 173-85. See also (Pandurang 118)

[27] *Womanism* 72. "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideal of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It

concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structures that subjugate the blacks…its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels".

[28] Ashley Dawson, "Beyond Imperial Feminism: Buchi Emecheta's London Novels and Black British Women's Emancipation", in *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, University of Michigan Press, 2007, 117.

[29] The *Joys of Motherhood*, 46.

[30] *Second Class Citizen*, 30.

[31] *Gwendolen*, 160.

[32] *Head Above Water*, 3.

[33] *The Joys of Motherhood*, and an excerpt from the novel, "A Man Needs Many Wives."

[34] In *The Family,* Gwendolyn is raped first by a fatherly neighbor Uncle Johnny and later by her own father Winston, in the absence of her mother Sonia. She becomes pregnant and would not reveal her child's father, for he was the breadwinner of the family and everyone and everything depended on him.

In *Kehinde,* Kehinde restores her individual self-worth by returning to London to live on her own, after finding out on her return to Nigeria that her husband had taken a second wife, to live in her own house, making her son realize that he may own it after her, but while she was alive the house was hers to keep.

[35] *The Family* attacks the devaluing of women, by treating rape in the family.

[36] Speaking about his experiences in London as an African woman, Buchi Emecheta defines her stories as: "Stories of the world … (in which) … women face the universal problems of poverty and oppression, and the longer they stay, no matter where they have come from originally, the more the problems become identical."

[37] She held visiting appointments in Pennsylvania State University, Rutgers University, Yale University, University of Calabar, University of London, etc. She often abandoned her secure teaching jobs in universities to return to story writing.

[38] Gwendolen, in *The Family*, who was raped and became pregnant by her father, was confined in a mental health facility to help her regain herself.

[39] See Adaku, the inherited second wife through levirate marriage in *The Joys of Motherhood*. She would leave Nnaife and Nnuego, after destroying the peace of their family before being inherited, to become a contractor earning enough money to send her two children to school.

[40] Observe the dignity and grace with which Nnụ Ego acquiesced to a life as a senior wife that she did not in earnest fancy, when her husband's dead brother's wife, Adakụ, barged into her home in Lagos meaning to be inherited by her husband, Nnaife.

[41] Emecheta owned with his first son, Sylvester, the Ogwugwu Afor Publishing Company in London.

[42] Emecheta's Awards and Recognition include Jock Campbell Award for the *Slave Girl* in the *New Statesman*; 1983 list ing in theBest of Young British Novelists; Member, British Home Secretary's Advisory Council of Race in 1979; Listed among 50 Black and Asian Writers in 2004 at the British Library for contributions to contemporary British Literature; Order of the British Empire (OBE) for literature in 2005, and in 1992 an Honorary Doctorate degree in Literature from Farleigh Dickinson University.