

Changing Worlds: The Nigerian Novels of Buchi Emecheta

Christine St. Peter
University of Victoria

ABSTRACT

Buchi Emecheta, an expatriate Nigerian living in England, balances cross-cultural points of view and literary forms in her tales of West African Women. This essay discusses six of her African-based novels; these span distinct historical periods, from the establishment of the British "Protectorate" in 1900 to the contemporary era of industrialization in post-colonial Nigeria. Emecheta's novels present progressively more radical perceptions of the meaning of female experience as she shows her women characters struggling to find their way amongst the bewildering shifts in cultural values.

In 1972, a Nigerian expatriate named Buchi Emecheta published in England the first of her eight novels.¹ This book, *In the Ditch*, and her second novel, *Second Class Citizen*, fictionalize her own life and record the process by which she found a literary voice by making a story of the sexual, racial and class discrimination she suffered in both Nigeria and England. Orphaned at an early age, Emecheta managed to win a state scholarship to a Nigerian high school, but when she finished her studies at the age sixteen she did the only thing possible in Ibo society: she got married. When her husband left for England to study she eagerly joined him, ambitious for more education herself. The next decade of her life leaves the reader breathless. By the time she was twenty-eight, she had given birth to five children, held various full-time jobs in libraries, taken a sociology degree at the University of London, gone through a violent divorce and written her first novel which, incidentally, her husband burned in a fit of jealous rage. Even

from this summary it should be clear that the life and times of Buchi Emecheta make for exhilarating reading and the title of a forthcoming autobiography, *Head Above Water*, would seem to promise an even more triumphal progress. But if some brief reference to Emecheta's life is necessary background here, it is not these autobiographical works that are the subject of this paper but the six novels, written between 1976 and 1983, which are set in Nigeria. All six have as their subject the social history of women in Nigeria from the establishment of British "Protectorate" in 1900 to the post-colonial present.

Because of the rapidity and violence of the social and political changes in Nigeria during this century, the reader of Emecheta's novels experiences the telescoping of the chaotic shift from the relatively stable pre-historical farm village to the insanity of the contemporary traffic jam, Lagos-style. Emecheta's range is enormous chronologically but perhaps more impressive is

the radical change in attitude she reveals towards her female subjects. In the first three of her African based novels, *The Slave Girl*, *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, she depicts women as slaves. In the three most recent, *Naira Power*, *Destination Biafra* and *The Double Yoke*, she sees women as the only available national saviours. In other words, in the early novels Emecheta acts as social historian, but she later combines this role with that of self-proclaimed didact and moral leader.

This combination is a congenial one to the western African writer. While Emecheta may choose to adopt the western literary convention of the novel form, she redefines it according to her own lights and in accordance with the ancient role of the Ibo oral storyteller. For example, we find in Emecheta's latest novel a startling example of how different is her concept of "fiction" from that of the European novelist: one of her thinly disguised autobiographical characters who is teaching creative writing at the University of Calabar (Emecheta did this in 1981) says to her class: "Good evening, boys, do sit down. Today we shall explore the possibility of working on biographical details, to make them look fictitious" (*The Double Yoke*, p. 163). No carefully drawn distinctions made here between "art" and "life," nor a narrow focus on individual character. Emecheta works quite self-consciously in that oral story-telling tradition where an individual's life has no significant narrative value until it has been set in an interpretative and didactic framework—a legend, a ritual performance or a proverb—which serves to perpetuate the cultural mores of the corporate kin-group or village. While the story may center on one life, that life will demonstrate the tensions or achievements precious to the social identity of the group, and the story-teller will charge the stories "with philosophical lessons" (*The Bride Price*, p. 23) praising the acceptable triumphs of the group-members and condemning their unacceptable deviations.

Emecheta herself follows this hortatory pattern, but she uses it to undercut or question the traditional wisdom, especially as it defines women. Here is a characteristic example, the concluding paragraph of *The Bride Price*, set in the 1950's:

So it was that Chike and Aku-nna substantiated the traditional superstitions they had unknowingly set out to eradicate. Every girl born in Ibuza [Emecheta's family village] after Aku-nna's death was told her story, to reinforce the old taboos of the land. If a girl wished to live long and see her children's children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people, and the bride price must be paid. If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold over every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernization, until the present day. Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody's guess (p. 168).

As the word "modernization" in this quotation reminds us, the traditional values of Emecheta's Ibo have come into question with the colonization of all Nigerian tribes by the English. The resulting confusion and misery have been the focus of much West African fiction by male authors, but Emecheta adds another layer of difficulty by chronicling the effects on women's lives of these collisions between warring religious, political, social and economic values. As the black African man is colonized by the white man, so the black African woman is colonized both by her own men and by the whites, male and female. Furthermore, in Emecheta's early novels she suggests that it is her women's biology and their inescapable social role as mother which causes this triple burden. It is no wonder, then, that one of Emecheta's basic metaphors for the traditional status of women is the figure of the female slave.

Just in case we have any doubts about what she means by female slave, Emecheta offers versions of the following story which must have fascinated her since she works it into two novels; it is the description of a ritual murder of an *Osu* or slave caste woman, who is expected to accompany her mistress into death's kingdom:

All the things that [Agunwa] would need in her after-life were gathered and arranged in her wooden coffin. Then her personal slave was ceremoniously called in a loud voice by the medicine man; she must be laid inside the grave first. A good slave was supposed to jump into the grave willingly, happy to accompany her mistress; but this young and beautiful woman did not wish to die yet.

She kept begging for her life, much to the annoyance of many of the men standing around. The women stood far off for this was a custom they found revolting. The poor slave was pushed into the shallow grave, but she struggled out, fighting and pleading, appealing to her owner Agbadi.

Then Agbadi's eldest son cried in anger: "So my mother does not even deserve a decent burial? Now we are not to send her slave down with her, just because the girl is beautiful?" So saying, he gave the woman a sharp blow with the head of the cutlass he was carrying. "Go down like a good slave!" he shouted (*Joys of Motherhood*, p. 2)

While this custom of ritual murder supposedly disappeared under English rule, Emecheta makes it clear that it persisted in the bush areas at least until the 1920's. But she extends the definition of slavery to include the condition of free women as well: "Every woman, whether slave or free, must marry. All her life a woman always belonged to

some male" (*The Slave Girl*, p.112). Furthermore, this belief that a woman must belong to a man is a constant, whether in precolonial tribal custom or in Christian doctrine:

There was certainly a kind of eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced maybe by centuries of traditions, taboos and, latterly, Christian dogma. Slave, obey your master. Wife, honour your husband, who is your father, your head, your heart, your soul (*The Slave Girl*, p. 173).

Emecheta is either unaware of or unwilling to admit the anthropological evidence which describes the significant power wielded by [some] Ibo women in pre-colonial days.² But that period is not the one which interests her in any case; she focuses instead on the suffering and confusion caused by the introduction of Christianity, of capitalistic economic structures and of western social customs which eventually undermine the old ways. In an uncharacteristically light moment in *The Bride Price*, Emecheta gives an example of the difficulties adolescent lovers experience trying to live out the impossible syncretism of two cultures:

[Chike] did not know what else to do but to start kissing her the way Europeans did in films. Aku-nna knew one was supposed to like being kissed but she did not know how to enjoy it. She had read in old copies of *True Romances* that kissing was meant to do something for a girl. Well, it had done nothing for her, but she let him have his play. All she wanted was to make him happy...the only thing that bothered her was that she had also heard from somewhere that kissing caused tuberculosis, but she did not want to ask him about that now... (p. 98).

But the imported celluloid and print fantasies have no power against the tribal customs which the village people persist in following. Even as she dreams of true romance Aku-nna knows perfectly well that a rival suitor could use a much more direct means of winning her than these tender kisses:

All the man...had to do was cut a curl of her hair...and she would belong to him for life. Or he could force her into sleeping with him, and if she refused his people would assist him by holding her down until she was disvirgined. And when that had been done, no other person would want to take her anymore (p. 132).

Aku-nna is brave enough to flaunt these traditions and elope with her forbidden suitor but when she falls ill of acute anemia in pregnancy, we find she is still a slave of tradition despite her western gloss. In a society which views the world animistically and believes, for example, that "every river had a goddess who could do with one or two human sacrifices from time to time" (p. 101), Aku-nna in her weakened state becomes easy prey psychologically for her uncle's juju doll which steals her life.

Whereas in her first two slave novels Emecheta tells the stories of young, orphaned and defenseless girls, in her third she turns to the story of a woman who fulfills all the requirements of the happy, successful woman in traditional Ibo society and the title of the book points out where-in that success lies: *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnu Ego is her husband's senior wife and she has borne him three fine sons; her four equally fine daughters do not count among her successes. But Nnu Ego and her family do not inhabit the old agricultural village where such fertile polygamy might make economic sense. They live in the cramped, impoverished world of modern Lagos in a one-room dwelling overflowing with children and multiple wives whose turns in the marital bed are necessarily everybody's busi-

ness. Here polygamy is a grotesque and painful anachronism.

In one of the novel's most pathetic moments, this too set in the early 1950's, Nnu Ego lies awake listening to her husband have intercourse with his newly acquired second wife, Adaku. When Nnu Ego quite gratuitously scolds her sleeping child, this is the response:

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 [her husband] 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 (p. 125).

Nnu Ego is a simple, honest woman who would not understand that Adaku's noisy sex-play might well be a survival tactic. As second and junior wife, her family position is very fragile, so she uses the age-old strategy of flattering the male ego, a skill that will stand her in good stead when she finally abandons the sinking family and becomes a prostitute, the most abominable of women's crimes. The irony here is that Adaku's whoring enterprise makes her financially independent and able to educate her daughters whereas the "successful" Nnu Ego is abandoned by her sons who go off to study in such places as "Emelika" and Canada.

But before Nnu Ego dies she begins asking herself some very radical questions:

When will I be free?...Never, not even in death. I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood...The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die...But who made

the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build (p. 187).

It is with this insight about the ways women perpetuate the values which enslave them that Emecheta reveals the didactic purpose of her next set of novels. Women can free themselves psychologically if not always physically—can refuse, at the very least, to be “good” slaves—but both Emecheta's life and her work suggest that the price of this freedom is self-exile in the consciously nourished perception that women are aliens in patriarchal worlds, the only existing worlds, and that any sense of comfort with the *status quo* makes one a slave. Thus Emecheta chooses to live and write in England where as a person who is black, critical, foreign and female she is a misfit, although now a famous and exotic one. Given the opportunity to return in glory to Nigeria in 1981 as a university professor of creative writing, she fled back to England after only a year. Out of place in Nigeria because of her skeptical criticism and her advocacy of women's rights which she says she learned from “middle-class English women” (*Second-Class Citizen*, p. 70), she is determined to be out of place in England, too, setting herself against any sort of orthodoxy, even a few of the useful ones. Refusing to travel under the feminist banner in England where she would seem to belong given her subject, she resolutely declares she is not a feminist³ and, as if to underscore this assertion has recently chosen to defend very publicly, both in the daily press and in her latest novel⁴ the practice of clitoridectomy, which most feminists, western or African, see as a fundamental degradation of the female body and spirit. Emecheta straddles two worlds, using the slippery position of alien as a measure of self-protection against cultural or intellectual assimilation and co-optation.

All three of her most recent novels have as central character a woman “been-to,” a Nigerian educated in England. All three women are at least temporarily unattached to males, two of the three have no children and all have financial independence. These anomalous privileges give them mobility and freedom not accessible to other Nigerian women and they use their position, in part, to instruct their less fortunate sisters. In *Naira Power*, for example, a novel published in the Macmillan Pacesetters series for young Nigerians, Aunti Bintu [sic], a visiting university professor from England, tells her sister-in-law, over the course of the novel, that Nigerians should practise birth control, reform their corrupt bureaucracy, learn to appreciate women's work inside and outside the home, fix up the Lagos sewage system, cease practising polygamy, fight rampant materialism, get rid of the mosquitoes, avoid the illicit drug trade and work for honesty and equality in marriage. Only Emecheta's superb story-telling talent redeems this book from its relentless didacticism.

Emecheta's most recent novel, *The Double Yoke* is similarly didactic and once again the reigning muse is a been-to visiting professor; this one enters the chaotic life of the University of Calabar where she succeeds in helping her all-male creative writing class meet the double yoke of modern Nigerian life: the conflict between the old “community burden” (African value) and the western “burden of individuality” (*The Double Yoke*, p.163.) But the real heart of the novel lies in the depiction of friendships among the female undergraduates, and the story of one in particular, an Efik girl named Nko. Nko is bright and competent but too pretty, and is ultimately forced to sleep with her professor to earn her grades, a not uncommon problem according to the novel. When this alliance is discovered, she is ostracized by the men but defended by the women. Despite her shame and resulting pregnancy, she too chooses a double

yoke, but the modern female version of academician and mother.

It is, however, Nko's friendship with other women that makes her survival possible; without this sisterhood, none of the women would overcome the extraordinary difficulties created for women by the precipitous changes in modern Nigeria. As Nko's mother says to her daughter:

You know sometimes I think you modern girls are not so lucky. When I was your age, all I was thinking of was how to go to the fattening room and make myself round and beautiful for your father... Now you have this new thing, this mad education for women and yet still, you want to have everything we had... You may call us ignorant, but we were happy and contented in our ignorance (*The Double Yoke*, p. 94).

The message, heavily underscored in all three of Emecheta's later novels, is that there can be no real happiness for Nigerian women in ignorance, so they had better start thinking for themselves and in the company of other women. And Emecheta increasingly stresses the incompetence or weakness of Nigerian men in comparison to the women.

Men as childish and women as strong: this leitmotif appears in all three of Emecheta's later novels, but it becomes the dominant chord in her 1981 war novel, *Destination Biafra*. Here she no longer presents a vision of women doomed by their biological destiny; instead, their attention to the cherished value of the reproductive realm, which the women share even if they are not biological mother, makes them strong and independent. The men, on the other hand, have been inculcated with a sense of their superiority and the hegemony of the public realm from which women are excluded in colonial, and post-colonial Nigeria. The men have been socialized into irresponsibility with tragic consequences

for themselves and their society. Their wartime heroics blind them to the unspeakable suffering of ordinary people and serve to camouflage their real concern—grabbing profits from the newly discovered Biafran oil deposits. In other words, the subject of *Destination Biafra* is the story and accompanying analysis of the rise and fall of Biafra. But this is a war novel told from the viewpoint of the female characters who learn to excoriate war and the sham culture which foment it.

It is worth noting in passing that this novel, unlike her others, has not been well received. This criticism could be just if it touched on stylistic problems, since the text is badly truncated by the editorial process that chopped away half the manuscript.⁵ But the criticism takes the form of rebuking Emecheta for her temerity in writing on "non-matrimonial themes." Chinweizu, the high priest of African letters in British society, says in his *TLS* review that:

Destination Biafra does not convey the feel of the experience that was Biafra... A writer whose reputation has been made with fictionalized autobiography must recognize that a leap to historical fiction, especially to the large canvas of tumultuous public history, may not be easy and may call for a different apprenticeship.⁶

Chinweizu could not have been unaware of the historical novels that followed Emecheta's "fictionalized autobiography"; what is absurd is his resistance to the idea that women, too, experience "public history" and might choose to write about it.

In this novel, the heroine Debbie Ogedemgbe, is a young Oxford graduate whose newly-rich father becomes one of Nigeria's political leaders after British withdrawal in 1960. The novel opens with this event and proceeds to the end of the brutal Biafran war. Debbie's remarkable gifts and achievements make her a woman apart, and

her resulting confidence led her to try various male roles, including that of active soldier. But as soon as the war breaks down the social texture which had protected such privileges, Debbie is diminished to the level of mere woman where she is abused, raped, starved and beaten just like her suffering sisters whether they are octogenarian Irish nuns or simple village girls. It is at that point that Debbie learns to appreciate the extraordinary strengths of women who in their role of mother or surrogate mother emerge as the sane sex, the preservers of life in war-torn Nigeria.

As in all of Emecheta's novels, the heroine is surrounded by a galaxy of minor women characters who, in this work, become chorus-like in their role of commentator. Here, for example, are the thoughts of Elina Eze as she assesses the actions of her husband, one of the Biafran leaders on the eve of defeat:

Pity at the short-sightedness of her husband and his sex came over Elina. How could grown men make such blunders, and yet elevate themselves with such arrogance that one could not reach them to tell them the truth? She did not want to perish with him; she intended to live and to see her children settled...and if possible to see her children's children and tell them the story of Biafra (*Destination Biafra*, p. 253).

In a chapter entitled "Women's War" Emecheta depicts most convincingly what war means to the women and children caught in it. But the title is important for another reason, as it conjures up the memory of a famous Nigerian event of 1929 when the native women rebelled against unjust taxation by the British. The colonial leaders and the history books they wrote call the insurrection the "Aba Riots" but to the women involved it was the "Women's War," an honorific title which justly credits the women for their swift mobilisation, effective strategy and orderly restraint. In her early work, *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta had treated this event very negatively,

not as an indication of the women's independence but as a sign of their enslavement to men: "I'm not paying any tax...[says the rich and powerful trader, Ma Palagada]. Maybe when [the British] see how determined we are, they will let our custom be—the custom that says only our men should pay for their heads, *because they own us*" (emphasis mine, *The Slave Girl*, p. 133).

In *Destination Biafra* Emecheta expands the ideological and economic resonances of the term "Women's War" to a deeper level of human experience, the universal pain and courage of women. As Debbie and her rag-tag group of women and the children they try to save hide from the soldiers of both sides and protect each other, Debbie marvels at the "resources of women" (p. 213). In the final desperate moments of the novel when the defeated Biafran leader escapes in a plane with his wife and his Mercedes, Debbie's English lover tries to persuade her to flee chaotic Nigeria. She turns to him:

I see now that [Nigerian and Biafran leaders] are colonialized. They need to be decolonized. I am not like him, a black white man; I am a woman and a woman of Africa. I am a daughter of Nigeria and if she is in shame, I shall stay and mourn with her in shame...I didn't mind your being my male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife; to meet you on an equal basis, like companions, yes, but never again to be your slave (*Destination Biafra*, p. 259).

Drawing the analogy between political and sexual colonization frees Debbie to throw off her form of the double yoke. But after Emecheta allows Debbie to make her passionate statement of dedication to cause and to a people, the narrator backs off nervously from the univocal declaration. When Debbie's former lover shrugs off Debbie's speech with the statement "That's life," the narrator closes the novel with this vague

agreement: "He was right, it was all a part of life" (*DB*, p. 259).

Despite the attempts at didacticism, the novelist always turns finally to the lived, daily experience of women which, in modern Nigeria, is never easy. Intellectual freedom is possible, if not always physical freedom. But this freedom can be won only at great cost by women who keep themselves uncomfortable and ill-at-ease in an ill-fitting world.

NOTES

1. *In the Ditch* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1972; New York: George Braziller, 1975); *Second-Class Citizen* (London: Allison and Busby, 1974; New York: George Braziller, 1976); *The Bride Price* (London: Allison and Busby, 1976; New York: George Braziller, 1976); *The Slave Girl* (London: Allison and Busby, 1977; New York: George Braziller, 1977); *They Joys of Motherhood* (London: Allison and Busby, 1979; London: Heinemann, 1979); *Destination Biafra* (London: Allison and Busby, 1981); *Naira Power* (London: Macmillan, 1982); *The Double Yoke* (London: Ogwugwo Afor, 1983; New York, George Braziller, 1983).
2. See, for example the following studies: Karmene Okonjo, "The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria, and Judith Van Allen, "'Aba Riots' or Igbo 'Women's War'? Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women": in Nancy G. Hafkin and Edna G. Ray (eds.); *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1976).
3. "Buchi Emecheta," *A New Reader's Guide to African Literature*, revised edition, eds. Han M. Zell, Carol Bundy, Virginia Coulon (London: Heinemann, 1983), p.384.
4. "Bill Would Ban Circumcision of African Women in Britain," *Globe and Mail*, Toronto, May 18, 1984. Nko, in *The Double Yoke*, (p. 157), speaks of her disgust that some women are not being clitorized.
5. Emecheta says in the "Author's Forward" that "the cost of production forced us to reduce the manuscript to half its original size: and one whole section of book was lost by literary agent. *Destination Biafra*, p. vii
6. Chinweizu, *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 February 1982, p. 228.