



## From Silent Victims to Rebellious Survivors: The Evolution of African Womanhood in Buchi Emecheta's Fiction

Dr. Longjam Bedana

Assistant Professor, Department of English, G.P. Women's College  
Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur, India

Email: [lonbeda@gmail.com](mailto:lonbeda@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

Buchi Emecheta is considered one of the most prolific Nigerian women novelists. As a woman writer, Emecheta's novels are a microcosm of African women's issues, including the plight of African women, motherhood, marriage, the marginalisation of women in traditional patriarchal African societies, discrimination against Black women in the West, and the education and empowerment of African women. Her women characters are representations of women, both as victims as well as survivors against any form of oppression: patriarchal, class, social, and racial. This study employs a comparative analytical approach to examine two seminal works: *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Kehinde* (1994). These novels portray a significant shift in the representation of African women, reflecting changing socio-cultural scenarios. By tracing the evolution from the submissive "silent victim" to the "rebellious survivor," this paper highlights how Emecheta's protagonists assert their individuality against patriarchal, social, and racial oppression. Keywords: African women, patriarchy, marginalisation, racism, empowerment.

### Introduction

African Literature in English, as an offshoot of Postcolonial Literature, reflects the massive social and economic shifts of the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras. These changes have greatly influenced the literary output of the land. In the pre-colonial era, African women held a dignified position in the traditional patriarchal African society. With the cataclysmic change brought by Imperialism, the status of African women diminishes gradually.

The women in post-colonial Africa are tabooed as "second-class" citizens, while the African menfolk occupy the central position. These women are silenced and confined to the cocoon of domesticity and household chores. They merely serve as the "breeding machine" in the family. All the major decisions are carried out by men in African society. There is no room for African women to assert their individuality and identity. As a woman, they only fulfil the roles of a daughter, wife, and mother. Their duty is to make their husbands happy and help the family

grow, thereby relegating the status of African women to a secondary position to that of their male counterparts.

Some great and prolific African writers who have contributed to African Literature include Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwapa, Nadine Gordimer, and Buchi Emecheta. They write of the trauma, loss, and cultural conflict caused by Imperialism. One similarity among the writers is that they write to preserve the traditional African culture and identity. Thereby trying to validate and glorify their traditional past. According to them, African civilization is among the oldest and richest in the world. Their works are replete with the celebration of their age-old customs and cultures. African women writers largely write about women's issues and seek to lend a voice that has long been silenced. In the broader canon of African women's writing—alongside figures like Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo—Emecheta stands out for her focus on sexual politics and the domestic "cocoon" that often silences women. Emecheta (1944-2017) was a prolific writer. To her credit, she had more than twenty literary works, comprising novels, short stories, and plays. A large part of her fiction is focused on sexual politics and racial prejudice, based on her own experiences both as a single parent and as a black woman living in Britain.

As a woman writer, Emecheta's novels are a microcosm of African women's issues, which comprises of plight of an African woman, motherhood, marriage, marginalisation of women in a traditional patriarchal society in Africa, discrimination of Black women even in a highly developed county like the United Kingdom, unavoidable traditions and culture of Africa and education and empowerment of African women. Her women characters are representations of women both as victims as well as survivors against any form of oppression: patriarchal, racial, social, etc. Emecheta's writings clearly defy any culture or

country that considers a Black woman as an outcast, a second-class citizen.

### Methodology

This paper uses a comparative analytical approach, focusing on the 15-year gap between the publication of *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Kehinde* (1994) to examine the evolution of female agency. The analysis is grounded in the womanist perspective expounded by Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. Unlike mainstream feminism, womanism addresses discrimination based on both gender and race. However, Emecheta's work complicates the traditional womanist emphasis on "community survival". As her characters evolve, they often find that the survival of the individual woman is a necessary precursor to, or even a replacement for, a community that remains stubbornly patriarchal.

### Discussion

African women writers have projected women from their perspectives of the predicaments and dilemmas of what it means to be an African woman in the traditional patriarchal society of Africa, unlike the male writers who portray women as a second sex to men. The status of women according to *The Holy Bible* clearly shows the derogatory position of women:

"Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you". (Genesis 3:16)

"A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. (I Tim. 2:11-14)

"For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." (I Cor. 11:8-9)

The praying manner of a Jew in his morning prayer explains the status and respect of womankind in a humiliating way: "Blessed be God. . . that He did not make me a woman." (Beauvoir, 22). All these explain the position of women in a patriarchal society. Men rule the world while women follow. Women are perceived by men in the way they wish to see. Women become what men want and not what women wish or desire.

In the words of Rolf Solberg, one needs to read a variety of literature to change the predetermined image of African woman. Solberg identifies the area to look for in such literature:

"But even there one is in danger of acquiring biased information. . . [W]hat one should really look for is the African woman seen from the "inside", in other words rendered by women." (Solberg 249)

Regarding the portrayal of women characters in African literature, Marie Umeh claims:

"The most celebrated female character in African creative writing is the African mother. . . African societies highly regard African women for their reproductive ability, and African writer similarly portray African women in roles where they are protecting, comforting and nourishing their children." (Umeh, 39)

As feminism was a liberation movement of women for equal socio-political rights as men by the "white" women in the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it failed to consider the plights and issues of "Black", "coloured", or Third World women. In this context, the novels *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Kehinde* can be best studied and analysed from the womanist perspective as expounded by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunwemi and Alice Walker. Just as feminism is against the discrimination of women based on gender, womanism is against

the discrimination of women based on both gender and race. The term "womanist" is generally considered to have been first introduced by the famous Afro-American novelist Alice Walker in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. As Walker skilfully contrasts the difference between the terms "feminism" and "womanism" in terms of colour: womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (Walker, xii). In the words of Patricia Hill Collins: black women are "womanist" while white women remain merely "feminist" (Collins, 10)

Buchi Emecheta, as a womanist writer, writes about the socio-cultural practices experienced by Black women in Africa. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, in this regard, states that Emecheta "deals mainly with the black woman as the victim of black patriarchy" (Ogunyemi, 67). She captures every detail of the traditional customs that make womankind a victim. Women have been represented as the "weaker sex" or the "second sex" and stereotyped with negative qualities such as sensitive, emotional, fragile, indecisive, submissive etc. To quote Simone de Beauvoir: To be feminine is to appear weak, futile, docile. (de Beauvoir, 334)

### **Historical Context and the "Silent Victim" in *The Joys of Motherhood***

The novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Emecheta's *magnum opus*, is set in the 1940s, spanning rural Ibuza and urban Lagos. This specific historical setting is crucial: in 1940s Nigeria, a woman's dignity was tied almost exclusively to her reproductive ability and the birth of male children. The protagonist, Nnu Ego, is trapped by these rigid expectations, viewing herself as a failure when she cannot meet the standards of the "males in her life". The position of women was related to the number of male children produced by the women. The highest respect was given to women who gave birth to a male child, while mothers who gave birth to a female child were considered less

respectful but much better compared to barren women. This confirms that an African woman fulfils the role of a complete woman if she bears children and it is the marriage institution that helps them in this fulfilment of their life.

In the novel, Nnu Ego is the daughter of the Ogbali village Chief Nwokocha Agbadi and one proud woman called Ona. When Agbadi's senior wife Agunwa dies, the dead wife is given a burial in which her young and resisting slave is supposed to be buried with her in her grave. The helpless slave girl is given a blow on her head and is forcefully buried with her mistress. But the slave girl returns to the world of living as Nnu Ego's *chi* (personal God in African culture). It is believed that since the slave girl died against her wish, Nnu Ego is cursed by the *chi* and as a result of this curse Nnu Ego is a barren woman in her first marriage. Emecheta skilfully weaves the African belief of *Chi* in the story to present the story realistically which deprecate the condition of African women in the traditional patriarchal society. Nnu Ego is brought back by her father Agbadi to his village as she becomes a barren woman which in the African context is the most humiliating situation of a married woman. Luckily, Nnu Ego gives birth to a son when she gets married to a second husband named Nnaife Owulum (a laundry man) whom she doesn't like or love at all. Emecheta presents the two characters oppositely attacking the accepted notion of a man as strong and a woman as weak. Nnu Ego is introduced to us as "wrestling like a man" (Emecheta, *TJOM*, 60) when someone tries to stop her from committing suicide and contrastingly Nnu Ego's comments on Nnaife on their first encounter ascribing feminine qualities to a man:

"... why, marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman!" (Emecheta, *TJOM*, 42)

The curse of her *chi* wouldn't let Nnu Ego to bear child and so her first born son dies. She cries out:

"But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore. The child is there, dead on the mat. My *chi* has taken him away from me. I only want to go in there and meet her. . ." (Emecheta, *TJOM*, 62)

Nnu Ego gives birth to as many children as nine, of which seven children survive (three boys and four girls). No doubt the children give Nnu Ego the tag of a "mother" but in the novel, she lives alone and dies alone on the roadside like a mad woman. Emecheta makes a point here that by raising such a number of children, motherhood can never be a joyful one if the children fail to look after their old parents. The title of the novel, quoted from Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru* (1966) is ironic in the sense that a mother of more than seven children dies as if no one is there to care for her. Emecheta gives a sarcastic touch to the story and the title. The concept behind bearing children is to prepare them to look after the old parents. The children should support the aged parents more specifically by the male children, i.e., by the sons. What Emecheta tries to project in the novel is the irony of motherhood in African society. She presents a culture and tradition set by men where a woman fulfils only the various prescribed roles of wives, mothers and daughters and not as a complete individual. Emecheta writes of Nnu Ego's lonely life throughout which she only lived for her children:

"I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to work myself to the bone to look after them. I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them; it will be hailed as good spirit so long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, if a young wife does not conceive or there is a famine, my

dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be free?" (Emecheta, *TJOM*, 186-7)

Nnu Ego is never free of her own. She is always in chained serving sometimes as the sacrificing mother and sometimes as the dutiful wife all for the good of male members of her family. Emecheta's protagonist Nnu Ego belongs to Marie Umeh's second type of image of African women:

"... the second portrayal of the African woman as an all suffering, self-sacrificing victim... according to Aidoo, the typical mother is one who sacrifices herself for her children" (Umeh, 39)

As one can see the painful irony of motherhood in Emecheta's novel, it can be summed up as Emecheta's skilful portrayal of the much cherished and desired mother in the African context. Nnu Ego achieves nothing at the end of her life, neither happiness nor her children's love. Emecheta questions the validity of such a sacrifice of a woman like Nnu Ego in her life. Nnu Ego has never been an individual of her own. She always identifies herself with her father, husband, and her sons. The writer also brings to notice the cry for daughters over sons. Emecheta writes emotionally for pitiable women like Nnu Ego:

"The men make it look as if we 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 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." (Emecheta, *TJOM*, 187)

The character Adaku serves as a vital foil to Nnu Ego. While Nnu Ego remains a "self-sacrificing victim" to a community that ultimately

abandons her, Adaku chooses to leave the marriage and live at her own disposal. Adaku's early attempt at rebellion highlights Nnu Ego's entrapment; she represents a path of individual survival that Nnu Ego, bound by the traditional mandates of her era, is unable to take. Consequently, Nnu Ego dies alone, a tragic end that signals the "collapse of these glorifying images of the African Mother" (Umeh, 39).

#### Evolution of Resistance in *Kehinde*

In contrast, *Kehinde* (1994) is set in the 1960s and 1990s, moving between London and Lagos. This more modern, cosmopolitan setting provides Kehinde with opportunities for resistance that were unavailable to Nnu Ego. In London, Kehinde gains financial independence through her job at a bank and benefits from a legal status that recognizes "the house" as a shared marital asset, rather than solely the husband's property.

The woman protagonist Kehinde of the same name in the novel is a married woman in her mid-40s who stays in urban London with her husband Albert Okolo and her children Joshua and Bimpe. It has been eighteen years since their stay in London, and they have become accustomed to the lifestyle of the London people. Kehinde works at a well-established Bank and earns much more than her husband, Albert who is just a storekeeper in a local shop. The problem arises in the novel when Albert decides to go back home to Nigeria, where he can claim his patriarchal power and authority. Kehinde doesn't agree with her husband at first, as a cosmopolitan woman, like Kehinde London has given her all the comfort and freedom unlike the stringent culture and tradition of her land. Kehinde could talk to Albert:

"... less formally than women like her sister, Ifeyinwa, who were more in more traditional marriages." (Emecheta, *Kehinde*, 6)

She influences her husband by saying that the house in London belongs to Albert, and the fact that they have been staying in London for so long years may find it difficult in adjusting with the native country Nigeria:

“‘We own a house’, Albert said quickly. He was not unaware of the legal status of a wife here in Britain. In Nigeria, the home belonged to the man, even if the woman spent her entire life keeping it in order. . . . Albert did not want trouble, so for the sake of peace he said, ‘Our house.’” (Emecheta, *Kehinde*, 4)

Emecheta describes a highly patriarchal culture of her people in which men in Africa decide everything be it marriage, family, work and paltry issues even for women. As decided by Albert, Kehinde has to abort her third child. According to Brenda F. Berrain:

“ . . . the abortion foreshadows the end of her marriage. In Nigeria, many children are a sign of wealth and a necessity.” (Berrain, 172)

Albert leaves his family and first goes to Nigeria to make arrangements for his family. Kehinde observes that her husband has been quite uninterested in her ever since he left London. She decides to join her husband and family in Nigeria, swallowing the fact that she will never feel at home with Albert’s annoying sisters. Kehinde is shocked to see that Albert has changed and has become an epitome of a typical African man. The shock becomes all the more bitter when Kehinde finds that her husband has a second wife, Rike, who is pregnant with a child. Kehinde finds herself thoughtless enough to have let Albert decide on the abortion of her man-child in London. Here Emecheta questions not just the African men but also the African women who are mothers on the rationality of abortion of a child. Albert cannot stick to his decision of raising another child, which means more expenditure. Kehinde, on the other hand, regrets listening to her selfish husband. If either of the two, either the husband or the wife, had

taken a firm decision, they would have been on good terms and quite happy. Kehinde hates Albert, who has then become more sophisticated with his life, fully exercising his patriarchal power over his wives, sisters, and children in Lagos.

A shift in the thinking of an educated woman like Kehinde occurs in the novel through the power of her assertiveness and rationality. Kehinde leaves her husband and family in Nigeria and goes back to London, where her heart belongs. She continues her further studies and stands on her own feet for survival in the racist London, where a Black woman getting a job is a huge matter. But through her perseverance and broad-mindedness, she survives in London without her husband’s or her son’s support. The cunningness of authoritative men like Albert and his son Joshua is shunned by Kehinde when Albert sent Joshua to take the London house and sell. Kehinde enjoys the new freedom and self-empowerment and declares: “This house is not for sale. . . . This house is mine.” (Emecheta, *Kehinde*, 108). One can see the shift in ownership of the house from “you” and “we” to “I”. Kehinde owns her house, not by her husband or her son. Berrain states in this connection:

“At this stage in Kehinde’s life, children are neither a binding force nor the only goal. She is not inclined to be exploited by an estranged husband or a son who both see her as a commodity.” (Berrain, 179)

Joshua cannot believe her mother lived quite happily all by herself without her family:

“But the mother he had found in England was different from the one he remembered. She had gone by herself and got a degree, and survived without any of them.” (Emecheta, *Kehinde*, 140)

Joshua is shocked to find her mother living a carefree life in London. He complains and charges Kehinde for her indulgence with the

Caribbean tenant Mr. Gibson. Joshua cries loudly: "Shio, so what kind of mother are you then?" (Emecheta, *Kehinde*, 141). Kehinde tells herself, when his son leaves her in complete outrage:

"Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything, it makes me more human."  
(Emecheta, *Kehinde*, 141)

Emecheta makes her protagonist emerge as a "rebellious survivor" against "the confining image of the long-suffering wife" (Berrain, 180)

Here, Mary Eliku, Kehinde's friend, functions as a second important foil. Initially, Kehinde judges Mary for leaving her marriage, but as she faces Albert's betrayal in Nigeria, she begins to "identify with her emotionally". This shift illustrates Kehinde's growth from a woman who judges other women by patriarchal standards to one who values sisterhood as an agent of empowerment. Unlike Nnu Ego, who sacrifices her life for her children, Kehinde realizes that claiming her right made her more human than ever.

There are instances from these two novels where Emecheta has sought the unity among women, in fact, to develop sisterhood to survive in a male-dominated society like Africa or in a highly racist place like London. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego hates Nnaife's first wife, Adaku, who leaves Nnaife and lives at her disposal by keeping many men friends. While in *Kehinde*, Emecheta presents another oppressed and later empowered woman character, Mary Eliku whom Kehinde shows no respect for leaving her marriage. Later in the novel Kehinde finds herself in Eliku's situation and identifies with her emotionally. Kehinde gains her empowerment with the help of her women friends and relatives such as her elder sister Ifeyinwa in Nigeria, her Nigerian friend Moriammo in London as well as her own dead twin sister' spirit Taiwo. Emecheta believes sisterhood can be an agent of women

empowerment. In one of her interviews in 1986 with Adeola James, Emecheta emphasizes:

". . . half of the problem rests with the women. They are so busy bitching about one another the men say the women are acting just as expected" (James, 36)

Another important technique employed by Emecheta is the skilful selection of her women characters' names. She names them in such a manner that women are important human beings whose worth is priceless. She gives them meaningful Igbo names such as "Nnu Ego" means "twenty bag of cowries", "Ona" means "priceless jewel" while "Kehinde" means "the last born of the twins" indicating that she will survive any hurdles in life, as she has survived her birth.

As a woman writer, Emecheta writes in order to bring a positive change in the perception of African women who, irrespective of their gender, are first human beings. Citing the purpose of Emecheta's writing, Ebele Eko states:

"Emecheta's philosophy is built on her conviction that all women suffer oppression and need to be liberated. Her priority is the removal of barriers to opportunities for female economic and psychological well-being from poor women in England, Nigeria and anywhere else." (Eko, 216)

#### Authorial Evolution: The Fifteen-Year Gap

The shift from the tragic "victim" Nnu Ego to the "rebellious survivor" Kehinde reflects an evolution in Emecheta's own thinking as a writer between 1979 and 1994. This fifteen-year gap allowed Emecheta to move beyond portraying the "black woman as the victim of black patriarchy" and toward a more "visionary image" of the empowered, independent woman. This trajectory mirrors Emecheta's personal journey as a "black woman living in Britain," refining her philosophy that all women must

remove barriers to their economic and psychological well-being

### Conclusion

To conclude, Buchi Emecheta's fiction demonstrates a clear evolution in the representation of African womanhood. By contrasting Nnu Ego's tragic adherence to 1940s traditionalism with Kehinde's 1960s cosmopolitan rebellion, Emecheta challenges the "second sex" stereotype. Emecheta's fiction also reflects her effort to promote hope, personal growth, and self-identity of African women. Her work suggests that while womanism values the community, the "rebellious survivor" must often assert her own identity first to become a truly "visionary" figure in a changing global scenario.

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