



## Buchi Emecheta as a Powerful Human Recourse of Self-development

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### Abstract:

*Buchi Emecheta was a major African author. She wrote about her struggle as a survivor in an immigrated country and about her dream to be an author in her first two autobiographical novels. She has created strong female protagonists in her all novels that depict African women's lives and their secondary social status. Buchi and her women characters prove themselves as the great resource of self-determination and self-development. Thus, present research paper tries to analyze Buchi Emecheta as a powerful human resource who has set an example of self-development through her struggle and education.*

**Keywords:** *Buchi Emecheta, Self-development, Self-determination, Education, Emancipation, Empowerment*

### Discussion:

Buchi Emecheta, a Britain-based Nigerian novelist, was born on 21 July 1944 in Yaba near Lagos, Nigeria, in an Igbo family. Due to strong hold of gender discrimination in her community, Emecheta was not admitted in the school while her younger brother, Adolphus, was allowed to go to school. Like an ordinary African girl, she was growing up by listening to the stories of her grandmothers and aunts in her family. The stories told by her big mothers instilled a desire in Emecheta to write her own stories and become a writer. However, she wished to take formal western education. Even though her parents kept her away from school, she refused to accept this discrimination and secondary position. Finally, she was admitted to Ladilak School and later Reagan Memorial Baptist School. Her struggle for equality started from her childhood.

Buchi Emecheta's childhood was hard. She was not living with her family because of her father's sudden death. However, she was kept with relatives but she had an urge of further education. She collected some money and filled

the entrance examination form for high school. In 1954, Buchi won a state scholarship for four years of the reputed school named Methodist Girls' High School, in Yaba, Lagos. During these days, she lived with different relatives as a needy child. She was aware of her desire to pursue her education and become a writer. She worked hard to fulfill her dreams to be an author. In this school, she accompanied with most talented students of the country and best Nigerian teachers. There she lived until she was sixteen years old. At that time, she passed West African School Certificate Examination with honors. She was dreaming to attend the University of Ibadan, which was not possible for her. To fulfill this dream, she found an option of marriage. She got married with Nduka Sylvester Onwardi, a young student to whom she met at school and was engaged from the age of eleven. Emecheta found Sylvester a capable, passionate and responsible life partner for her. His family was unable to pay 500 pounds as her bride price to Emecheta's family, as per the demand of her mother and other family members. Thus, Emecheta and Sylvester

eloped. They got married in 1960. After marriage, in Lagos the couple was happy and blessed with first daughter and then a son. Her husband moved to London to study Accountancy at the London University. Emecheta remained in Lagos and worked for the American Embassy for two years to collect money for her departure to London. Till 1962 she was planning to get rid of the struggle.

In February 1962, Emecheta travelled by boat and joined her husband to London with her two young children. The couple lived in one-room flat with no facilities. This situation was hard for her and different from Nigerian lifestyle. In London, she had three more children. Emecheta, at the age of twenty-two, had five children in all. They are Florence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy and Alice. In London also her struggle continues.

Her economic condition was not favorable. Being an African, Emecheta was aware of her weak English skills but she was strongly determined to improve them and started writing. However, the upbringing responsibilities of five children and her husband's lack of ambitious nature, forced her to work outside home rather than focusing on full time writing.

In 1972-1974, she got a job of librarian in the British Museum, which she found quite satisfying. There she realized that her dream of becoming an author would come true, as many books surrounded her. She began to write her first novel in her spare time. When she finished her first novel, *The Bride Price*, she was happy, excited and proud. She gave the manuscript to Sylvester to read. Instead of reading, he burned it with jealousy, rage, anger and disappointment. He was very suspicious of her writing. Her abusive husband objected her writings because he thought that she was disclosing the Igbo cultural facts and bringing shame on his family. Emecheta shocked by this incident.

This depressing incident finally led to their separation in 1969. After their separation, she moved with her children to a slum area in London. There she faced many problems and experienced a passive nature of British welfare system. These experiences provided a ground for her first two autobiographical novels.

In her autobiography, *Head above Water*, Emecheta writes about her hardships in London. She says, "As for my survival for the past twenty years in England, from when I was a little over twenty, dragging four cold and dripping babies with me and pregnant with a fifth one – that is a miracle" (Emecheta, *Head above Water* 5).

In 1972, she began to write regular articles, 'Observations of the London Poor', in *The New Statesman*, a British left-wing magazine, about her experiences of unsuccessful marriage, racism and poverty in London and her struggle for survival as a single Black immigrant-working mother of five children. She describes these experiences as; "charting my social reality" in an interview with Julie Holmes (Holmes). They are collected into her first book, *In the Ditch*, which launched her as a black author. It is an autobiographical novel. Adah Ofili is the female protagonist and Emecheta's mouthpiece, who is strong, determined and violent young African woman struggling to survive in London. She aggressively fights against the adverse situations and relegates herself and her five children from a welfare system of a "problem family" by obtaining western education and standing firm in spite of sexual, racial and class oppression. By the novel, Emecheta comes in front of her audience with her full potentiality.

From 1969 to 1976, she worked as a youth worker and a sociologist with the Inner London Education Authority. Until this time, she launched her career as a social worker and author. Her knowledge in sociology helped her analyzing

the social structures of British society in her first two novels.

Emecheta's passion for education took her to several places to impart her knowledge. From 1972, she began lecturing as a visiting professor at several universities throughout the United States including Pennsylvania State University, Rutgers University, Yale University, University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Illinois at Urbana – Champaign. She was senior resident fellow and visiting Professor of English at the University of Calabar in Nigeria in 1980 to 1981. In 1974, she completed B. A. in sociology and later M. A. in philosophy from London University.

Emecheta's second novel, *Second-Class Citizen*, published in 1974. It is a prequel to her first novel *In the Ditch*. To these novels, she calls "Documentary Novels" because they are highly based on her life as black emigrant struggling in London in 1960s. Here, she provides an account of her early days in London. She describes her husband's negligence towards his studies and his harsh, abusive and inhuman treatment to her that caused their separation. The same protagonist, Adah Ofili, is a Nigerian young woman, moved to London with her husband Francis Obi, struggling to bring up her children. Gradually, she feels rejected in the British society and neglected by her husband. Thus, this story depicts Adah's separation with Francis and her struggle to reject a second-class identity in London. The story also throws a light on the events happened in Emecheta's life for example, her husband burnt her first novel, their separation and her dream to be an author. She won the Daughter of Mark Twain Award in 1975 for this novel.

After this novel, she came up with plays like *The Juju Landlord* (1975), *A Kind of Marriage* (1976), *Family Bargain* (1987). Her plays, *The Juju Landlord* and *A Kind of Marriage*, performed in the London Theatre,

which highlights the problems of inequality faced by African women in their day-to-day life. In 1976 to 1978, she worked as a social worker in Camden, North London.

Her third novel, *The Bride Price* was published in 1976. It is her first work to be set in early 1950 in Lagos and Ibusa. She portrays a new character in central role. The story moves around a young female protagonist, Aku-nna, struggling with cultural values, which destroy her life in a tragic way. This novel shows Emecheta's drastic change in the selection of the subject matter and mental growth as a writer.

In 1976, she produced her first screenplay; *A Kind of Marriage*, telecasted on BBC. In 1977, Emecheta worked as a social worker in London. At that time, she came with her new fiction *The Slave Girl*. This book talks about a poor Igbo girl Ojebeta, who is sold as a slave by her brother to a rich African woman. It is a story of Ojebeta as a slave. Here, Emecheta attacks on the institutions, marriage and slavery. For this novel, she won The New Statesman Jock Campbell Award for Commonwealth Writers in 1979. In the same year, the novel got widely recommendation for the Best Third World Writer for 1976-1979. She worked as a member of British Home Secretary's Advisory Council on Race in 1979. In the same year, she lectured various universities in the United States. Emecheta contributed to various foundations throughout her life.

The theme of slave like treatment to woman in marriage is continuing in her next novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*, her magnum opus, arrived in 1979. It highlights the joy of motherhood, which comes with pain, anxiety, obligations, responsibilities and burden. Its ironical title was highly appreciated by her critics and readers, as the story talks about the tribal African notion of the necessity for woman to be fertile and above all, she should give birth to a

male child, which decides her fate. For this novel, she received the Best Black Writer in Britain prize in 1980. In the same year, she worked in Nigeria as a Senior Research Fellow and visiting professor of English at the University of Calabar. *The Joys of Motherhood* has translated into French and German and now Emecheta has become an international personality.

After this novel, Emecheta shifted her focus towards children fiction like *Titch the Cat* (1979), *Nowhere to Play* (1980), *The Moonlight Bride* (1980) and *The Wrestling Match* (1981).

In 1981, Emecheta along with Maggie Murray published a book, *Our Own Freedom*, a photographic exploration based on the lives of women from Eritrea, Zimbabwe and Azania, who are active and at the center of their societies and performing important role as teachers, farmers and traders. Emecheta has written introduction and commentary to this unique book, which tries to analyze the struggle, dilemma and realities of African women. The title of this book comes from Buchi Emecheta's famous introduction where she speaks about women's freedom and their value. Next year, she wrote a novelette named *Naira Power* especially for Nigerian readers.

After an interval of four pleasurable children's books and one novelette, Emecheta's pen turned towards a new theme with *Destination Biafra*, in 1982. It is a story of Nigerian Civil War. This novel got mixed critical response of her readers. *Destination Biafra*, which was her sixth novel and she was quite excited and ambitious for this project. It is about the separation of Biafra from Federal Nigeria to the Republic of Biafra. This war lasted for 30 months in between 6 July 1967 to 15 January 1970. Emecheta wanted to write a novel on the issue of Nigerian Civil War. Therefore, she decided to collect more information about the Nigerian Civil War. Thus, she went to Nigeria. However, the higher authorities of Sandhurst, the Royal Military

Academy, did not allow her to research, which was essential for the book. Hence, she accepted a job of a cleaner at this academy. Here, Emecheta's passion for work is clearly observed.

She completed this novel based on the Nigerian Civil War. After publishing the novel, she observed that a chapter of eighty-six pages, which was entirely based on Sandhurst research, is omitted from the novel. This omission was not discussed earlier with her, either by British publisher Alice and Busby or by an agent. Over this incident, she was highly disappointed which lead to her breakup with publisher, who later clarified that the chapter was lost by them. She also fired her agent and decided to start her own publishing house. In 1983 she established her own publishing house named Ogwugwu Afor Company was located in London as well as in Nigeria. When she completed the book, she changed her strategy by selling out the paperback rights. Behind establishing her own press, her intention was very pious. She wanted to provide good platform and financial help to emerging Black writers.

Emecheta wrote her next fiction *Double Yoke*, a campus novel published by her newly formed publishing company, in 1983, immediately after her return to England from the University of Calabar, where she spent some time lecturing on creative writings. This novel is set in the same Calabar University campus. It is the story of a young student Nko, struggling to fulfill social demands, traditional female role and her own wish to be an independent woman. Her male professor Ekot and her boyfriend physically exploit Nko. Later, both the novels, *Double Yoke* and *The Joys of Motherhood* have made into films.

She worked, as a member of the Arts Council of Great Britain from 1982 to 1983. She was also a regular contributor to *The Guardian*, *New Statesman* and *Times Literary Supplement*

and University of Wollongong Australia's *Kunapipi: Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.

In 1983, Emecheta awarded as one of the twenty-best young British writers from The Book Marketing Council. In the same year, she was listed among the twenty best young British novelists in the literary journal named *Granta*, along with some great British authors like Martin Amis, Ian McEwan and Salman Rushdie.

In 1983, she wrote another novel, *The Rape of Shavi*, set in an imaginative African land named Shavi. In the same year, she combined her first novel, *In the Ditch* and second novel, *Second-Class Citizen* in a combined book *Adah's Story: A Novel*.

In 1986, she published her autobiography, *Head above Water*, which describes her continuous struggle to bring up her five children in a foreign land as a single black immigrant mother, to obtain further education, her search for jobs and her strong wish to become an author. The book also explores life and social status of black people in London. It also shades some interesting light on Emecheta's personal growth as an author. The book gives a faithful account of her emotional involvement with her novels. Her autobiography throws a light on her journey full of hardships. It was quite appreciated by her readers.

In 1986 she delivered a scholarly lecture on feminism, entitled as *Feminism with small f* in second African Writers' Conference held in Stockholm, Sweden. Later, this lecture was published as a book *Criticism and Ideology: African Writers Conference* edited by Kristen Holst Petersen in 1988. After publishing her lecture into a book, it gained popularity. With this lecture Emecheta established herself as a Feminist though she rejects it.

In 1987, Emecheta shows her concern towards African emigrants to London and Western countries in her 11<sup>th</sup> novel, *Gwendolen*,

appeared in 1989, which also published in the United States with a different title, *The Family*. Here she chooses a West Indian girl as a protagonist rather Nigerian. Like her previous works, *Gwendolen*, also presents the theme of woman's oppression by men

Since 1990, Emecheta was a member of PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists), and association of international women writers. In 1992, she received an honorary doctor of literature degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. She completed her M. Phil. degree in social education and she achieved her Ph. D. degree in 1991.

In 1994, Buchi Emecheta comes up with her new work named *Kehinde*. The protagonist, Kehinde Okolo, is 35 years old, married and well settled Nigerian woman, living in London with husband, Albert and children. Kehinde protests against her husband's second marriage without her consent and gives importance to her own social status, self-respect and self-realization.

In her last novel, *The New Tribe*, published in 2000, Emecheta first time employs a male protagonist. In 2001, she served as a judge for the Caine Prize along with J. M Coetzee. In 2005, Emecheta was honored by the Queen Elizabeth II, with the Order of British Empire (OBE) for her service to literature. The British Government gives this award to the recognized scholars for their brilliant achievements in the field of sciences, public services, arts and charitable works. Emecheta was fluent in five African languages like Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Hausa and Urhobo.

She has also written some important articles in the periodicals like *The Black Scholar*, *Essence*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Publishers Weekly* and *World Literature Today*.

In 2010 Buchi Emecheta suffered by a stroke. On January 25, 2017, she passed away in her home in London at the age of 72. She is been

distinguished by Ashley Dawson in *Mongrel Nation* as, “The first successful black woman novelist living in Britain after 1948” (Dawson 117). Her books are translated into 14 languages such as French, German, Dutch, Italian, Korean and Swedish languages. On 21 July 2019 Google, internet’s widely preferred search engine, celebrated Emecheta’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday by flashing her pictures on Google Doodle.

### Conclusion:

This was a short description of Emecheta’s life and work. Her life was full of struggle, hardships and obstacles but she constantly worked to achieve her goal to become a successful author. She played various roles in her life like a survivor, wife, mother, student, author, teacher, judge, publisher and social worker. While playing all these roles she kept herself determined and developing. Her journey from Nigeria to London and from a fatherless child to O.B.E. was not trouble-free but highly appreciable. Through her stories, she shows patriarchal domination and women’s lives in Africa but by her own story, she shows a golden path to break the shackles of dominance. She provides only solution that is education, a weapon for women’s emancipation and self-development.

Thus, it can be aptly said that Buchi Emecheta was a powerful human resource who worked for self-development through education and set a unique example for women.

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