

## Representation of Nigerian Women in the Fictions of Buchi Emecheta

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### Abstract

Buchi Emecheta, a prominent Nigerian author, explores themes of gender, space, and identity in several of her novels, providing a nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by women in both African and diasporic contexts. Emecheta's work is often seen as striving for the liberation of women, though she herself said, "I'm not a feminist. I'm just a woman who struggles against patriarchal thinking and traditions in her society." Her novels depict the harsh realities women face, particularly the expectation that women should only care for male children and the later physical and mental abuse endured by those who give birth to daughters. Emecheta was the first African writer to vividly express her identity and life experiences through her novels. The themes of her works revolve around the representation of Nigerian women, their works and the emotions of helplessness and powerlessness of women, depicting the dehumanizing nature of male-dominated society, racism, and cultural traditions. In fact, the role of women has been one of the major themes in African women's fiction. This paper focuses on the existence and representation of African women and an examination of five novels by Buchi Emecheta, a prominent female Nigerian novelist. The present research work is significant, useful, and relevant as it sheds light on the themes of selected novels by Buchi Emecheta.

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### Introduction

Florence Onyebuchi "Buchi" Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria, on July 21, 1944. Her father, Jeremy Nwabudin, and her mother, Alice Emecheta, belonged to the Igbo ethnic group. In Igbo society, women were often relegated to roles of inactivity and silence, expected to embody feminine qualities that supported traditional, subservient ideas of womanhood. Although her parents were not highly educated, they adhered to the lifestyle promoted by the Church Missionary Society. Her father worked as a molder for the railways. At that time, the education of girls was practically non-existent and was opposed to the independence movements in Nigeria during the 1930s. Buchi Emecheta was determined to receive an education and wanted to attend the same school as her brother. When she was eleven, her father died, leaving her family in a difficult position. African traditions did not prepare women for single parenthood, encouraging them to stay in marriages at all costs to avoid this fate. Consequently, her mother moved in with her late husband's brother to their native Ibuza village. Buchi, in her adolescence, stayed in Lagos with her mother's cousin, who treated her more like a

servant than a relative. She received a four-year scholarship from Girls Methodist School, where she learned English and other native languages alongside regular subjects.

After completing her schooling, Emecheta married Sylvester Onwordi at the age of sixteen. Onwordi was also a student, studying accounting. At seventeen, she gave birth to her first child, Chiedu, followed quickly by her second child, Ikechukwu. Life in England was challenging for Emecheta, as she faced the dual pressures of being an immigrant and dealing with an abusive husband. Her marital life began to disintegrate, especially after she bore three more children: Chukwuemeka, Obiajulu, and Chiago. By the age of twenty-two, Emecheta, now a mother of five, found herself in an oppressive and violent marriage. She left her husband, who had raped her in their new apartment, resulting in her fifth pregnancy. Sylvester's frustration, fueled by racial discrimination, unemployment, and repeated academic failures, was often taken out on Emecheta. Her resolve to write about women's liberation grew stronger after her husband destroyed her first manuscript, *The Bride Price*. This incident galvanized her to stand against suppression. In 1966,

Emecheta separated from Sylvester and moved out with her five children to a public housing estate in London, supported by the British social welfare system. She later worked as a librarian at the British Museum from 1960 to 1964 and as a Library Officer from 1965 to 1969. Concerned about leaving her children alone at home, she eventually resigned and started a new job at the American Embassy in Lagos, which offered a better salary. Despite facing numerous challenges, Buchi Emecheta appeared as a significant literary figure. She passed away on January 25, 2017, in London, England. Throughout her career, Emecheta wrote twenty novels, including *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *The Rape of Shavi* (1983), *Second Class Citizen* (1974), and *In the Ditch* (1972). Her works, which also include *Gwendolen* (1989), *Kezia* (1994), and *The New Tribe* (2000), addressed the complexities of immigrant life in Great Britain. Emecheta's writing significantly influenced the literary scene of West Africa and inspired other writers, such as Elechi Amadi, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, and Flora Nwapa. Her novels vividly depict the customs, religious beliefs, and superstitions of Igbo society, providing a critical lens through which to understand the intersection of gender, space, and identity. In the works of African black women, feminist thoughts and experiences are prevalent. They wrote about marginalized societies and the oppression of women by male-dominated societies. Many black feminist writers, such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariamma Ba, and others have contributed to this literature on representation of black African women and their works. Buchi Emecheta's writings shed light on the experiences of black women in different settings. In her novel "The Joys of Motherhood," the central character Nnu Ego is a traditional African woman navigating the traditional Igbo society and modern Nigeria. Critic Eusatce Palmer describes the marginalization of black women in the novel, highlighting the female perspective's resistance to male chauvinism and the patriarchal system's oppression of women. A researcher also breaches into the concept of the subaltern in the novels of Alice Walker's "The Color Purple," Bapsi Sidhwani's "Ice Candy Man," and Buchi Emecheta's "The Bride Price." In this research paper, Buchi emphasized the intersection of gender with education, poverty, and enslavement. In Nigerian society, customs and traditions often disregard the extremity of women, seldom affording them respect, and using them merely to satisfy physical and familial needs. According to African tradition, black women are often seen only as child-bearing machines responsible for caretaking of children and other family members. Niara Sudarkasa in "The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies" refers to glaring absence of gender in the pronoun of many African languages and the interchangeability of first names among female and males. Throughout Africa and other African country as Nigeria, roles and responsibilities are gendered. Men are responsible primarily for productive work while women are responsible for both productive and reproductive work. Furthermore, women and men have different spaces and identity over which they have authority. Although gender, space and identity are typically the norm in American culture, they are not spaces that everyone can safely or practically use.

## Determining Factors of Motherhood in the Joys of Motherhood

This autobiographical fiction of Buchi Emecheta focuses on defining motherhood. Because a woman when she becomes a mother that becomes the very pleasant time. In every society, young girls are often seen as potential future mothers and are conditioned to believe in the importance of marriage. Women worldwide have the natural ability to bear children and are often celebrated for their innate sense of motherhood, as all love begins and ends with motherhood. She represents the whole living world as mother. Victorian writer Robert Browning beautifully describes the nature of motherhood, highlighting that a mother embodies unconditional love. Buchi Emecheta, who gave birth to five children, faced numerous challenges, including a lack of education, money, awareness, and the absence of her husband. Despite these hardships, she raised her children alone, demonstrating the profound love and resilience of a mother. Her husband abandoned her during a time when she needed him most, but she did not succumb to the adverse conditions and oppressive customs of African culture. Emecheta understood the depth of a mother's love, drawing from her own experiences. Her mother was also oppressed by a male-dominated society and suffered due to financial hardships. Motherhood occupies a significant place in everyone's life, as every human being is born from a mother. A mother is synonymous with love, care, nurture, protection, patience, selflessness, and sacrifice. Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, published in 1979, explores the factors of motherhood through the life of Nnu Ego, a Nigerian woman whose life revolves around her children. The novel depicts what it means to be a mother in a Nigeria where traditions, cultures, and customs are evolving, along with marriage, colonialism, and women's roles in society.

Nigeria, being a British colony, experienced significant cultural and societal changes. Simone de Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex*, published in 1949, discusses the feminist concept that a little girl is often given a doll to play with, teaching her to assume the role of a mother and exhibit maternal behaviors from an immature age. Similarly, Emecheta's portrayal of motherhood in her novel reflects the deep-rooted expectations and realities faced by women in African societies, emphasizing the strength and perseverance required to fulfill the role of a mother amidst changing societal norms.

## Gender Subordination in *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen*

The word "subordination" is derived from the Latin word *subordinus*, which means servitude, subjugation, and subservience. Gender refers to the discrimination or classification between the sexes, male and female. Males have traditionally defined themselves as superior to females. Buchi Emecheta, a Black feminist writer, and novelist who personally experienced discrimination and racism, addresses these issues in her works. This chapter focuses on gender discrimination, space, and the identity of specified genders as reflected in *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen*. Both novels highlight the impact of gender discrimination on the space and identity of women in a male-dominated society.

Under colonialism, Black women lost their identity and lacked a place within the African cultural context. In the Ditch tells the story of a Nigerian Igbo woman whose childhood was marked by neglect from her parents and society due to her gender. In a colonized African society, being female is seen as a curse for Black women. Her father did not want to send her to school for an education like her brother.

Despite the societal constraints, the girl from In the Ditch strives to get an education. She collects the required money for entrance, evaluates herself and manages to enroll in school. Despite the challenges, she stays undeterred by the difficulties in her life. The orthodox society she lives in does not value the education of girls, viewing it as a waste of money. Consequently, there is little space or identity afforded to females. Second Class Citizen also deals with themes of gender subordination. In this novel, Emecheta depicts the struggles of a Nigerian woman who faces discrimination and marginalization in a male-dominated society. The protagonist's journey reflects the broader struggles of Black women who fight for their space and identity amidst oppressive cultural and societal norms. Both novels vividly illustrate the challenges faced by women in asserting their identities and claiming their spaces in a patriarchal and colonial context. Emecheta's works serve as a powerful commentary on the enduring issues of gender discrimination and the resilience of women who strive to overcome these obstacles.

### **A Study of Traditionally Oppressed Women in the Bride Price**

The Bride Price by Buchi Emecheta offers a deep exploration of gender roles, space, identity, and the experiences of traditionally oppressed women in Nigerian society, particularly in Lagos. The story initially centers around the Odia family, consisting of Ezekiel and Ma Blackie, who have two children named Nna-nndo, a son, and Aku-nna, a daughter. Aku-nna is the pivotal character of The Bride Price. This novel examines how traditional gender roles confine women and limit their opportunities. The expectations placed on women in the story shape their lives and choices significantly. In the patriarchal world of African culture, men are respected while women are expected to obey and follow their husbands without asserting themselves. Women are not central figures in tribal society, where, after the death of their husbands, property is inherited by their sons rather than by the widows. Women have no choice but to adhere to the traditions of their society, regardless of their personal likes or dislikes.

Emecheta's portrayal of Aku-nna's life vividly illustrates the oppressive nature of these traditional gender roles. The novel explores the struggles of women who are bound by societal expectations and the limited space they must assert their identities. Aku-nna's journey highlights the harsh realities faced by women who must navigate a world where their value is often tied to their obedience and their ability to fulfill traditional roles. Through The Bride Price, Emecheta sheds light on the systemic oppression of women in Nigerian society and the ways in which cultural traditions perpetuate gender inequality. The novel serves as a powerful critique of these traditions and an exploration of the resilience and agency of women who strive to overcome their oppressive circumstances.

### **The Role of Women in the Slave Girl**

Highlighting the story of one female character, Ojebeta, Buchi Emecheta shows the complexities of slavery within the social system of British colonial Africa. By focusing on this individual, the author indicates ways that specific people, including women, negotiated a patriarchal system that disadvantaged females and used the commerce of human beings as an important element of its economy. Emecheta uses a traditional African storyteller as the novel's narrator, who provides background on the social organization of the fictional Ibuza until the early 20th century, when Ojebeta's story begins. The girl's parents, Okweukwu and Umeadi Oda, also have two sons. Although the only girl child in the family is treasured by her parents, when they die in an epidemic, her eldest brother, Okolie, becomes her guardian. As he must pay the expenses for his coming-of-age ceremony, Okolie sells his sister to help raise the funds. At age seven, Ojebeta becomes the slave of Ma Palagada and moves to Onitsha. This relative, who is a market trader, has six other slaves.

While Ojebeta is living and working in the Palagada household, she is allowed to attend school. When Ma's son, Clifford, desires to marry the girl, her status correspondingly increases. However, when his mother dies, he loses interest and agrees to his sister's suggestion that Ojebeta serve as her maid. Instead, she returns home and, emulating Ma as a businesswoman, establishes herself as a trader. Another Palagada slave, Chiago, marries the widowed father, and two of the other slaves marry each other. When she and Jacob Okonji decide to marry, he must pay the bride price to Clifford, who became her owner when his father died. They marry, however, without doing so and have two children. Jacob's delay in paying is later interpreted in causing her to miscarry in her next pregnancy. Jacob pays Clifford when he comes to town. Although slavery has already been outlawed under British rule, the traditional marriage payment system was allowed to continue.

### **Summation**

Buchi Emecheta's novels often explore themes of gender, space, and identity, particularly in the context of African women's experiences. In her works, the negotiation of these themes is central to her storytelling. Emecheta provides a critical lens through which the intersectionality of gender, space, and identity can be examined, revealing how societal expectations shape and constrain individual lives. Her work challenges readers to reflect on the dynamics of power and identity, particularly as they pertain to women in various cultural contexts.

Emecheta's novels offer rich insights into the complexities of gender, space, and identity within African and diasporic contexts. Through her characters' experiences, readers gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and triumphs associated with navigating cultural expectations, societal norms, and personal aspirations. Her storytelling underscores the resilience and agency of women who strive to assert their identities and claim their spaces in a world that often looks to marginalize them. Emecheta's work continues to resonate as a powerful exploration of the human condition and the quest for selfhood. Her novels not only highlight the systemic oppression faced by women but also celebrate their strength and perseverance. Through her vivid and poignant narratives, Emecheta invites readers to engage with the intricate dynamics of gender, space, and identity, offering a profound commentary on the struggles and resilience of African women.

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