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A Womanist Study of Buchi Emecheta's The Bride Price and The Joys of Motherhood

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Abstract

Buchi Emecheta (1944 - 2017) was a Nigerian Igbo writer. Her novels deal with difficulties and the different roles of women in immigrant and African societies. Her characters explore the tension between tradition and modernity. Originally a protest writer, Buchi Emecheta's early, stinging critique of male chauvinism in Nigeria and England is clear and passionate. Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta has been the most vocal and persistent advocate of direct feminist protest in modern African literature. Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* examines how women in African society are consistently assigned a subordinate status and are always reliant on their husbands, fathers, or men. However, the story's heroine defies this tradition and goes for her own path, illustrating how things have changed even in rural Africa. Set in Lagos, her novel *The Joys of Motherhood* exposes the dehumanizing effects of colonialism on the urban segment of society. The heroine of this book, Nnu Ego, cannot respect her husband, Nnaife, who, in contrast to the "guy in her town," is degraded to the point where he takes pride in cleaning his mistress's smalls and must ultimately go to fight in the battle to protect her nation. The present research paper aims to study womanism in Buchi Emecheta's two novels- *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

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Introduction

Womanism: Not all women experience oppression in the same manner worldwide. Class, gender, and ethnicity all significantly influence the situation. It is evident that women's circumstances in developing and undeveloped countries are different from those in developed ones, and even within the latter, the type and extent of female oppression varies by community based on racial and socioeconomic status. Consequently, when examining womanism, the tripod criteria of race, gender, and class gain importance.

Many African critics have recognized the legitimacy of feminism in African countries, whereas Western feminism has been criticized for being insufficient to address the ills of Third World gender issues. African critics call for a genuine liberation of African womanism and condemn imitation. The rejection of the term "feminism" by authors such as Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa highlights the racial, cultural, and economic differences from Western feminism. Considering both sides, it can be said that womanism is a unique kind of

feminism that addresses issues that are important to women of color, especially black women. At the same time, the concept's roots are deeply rooted in feminist and post-colonial philosophy, as the latter addresses the concerns of women and the former the challenges of the disadvantaged class. Thus, the fundamental ideas of post-colonial feminism can be used to analyse womanism. However, because it encompasses all women of color, regardless of race or class, the word "womanism" has become popular.

At first, the feminism that emerged in the Third World was a perfect replica of the Western model, bringing forth a confusing jumble of theory and practice that did not add together. As a result, feminists from the Third World started advocating for an alternative school of thought that disapproved of the idea of universal sisterhood. The concept of sisterhood was challenged by many black feminists. Thus, irate demonstrations against essentialism quickly replaced the initial Westernization of Third World feminism. This hypothesis gained traction in academic circles and disapproved

the notion that the two billion women worldwide may be categorized into a single group.

It becomes evident that Third World women belong to the group known as women, albeit with some unique characteristics. Although they differ from their counterparts in the First World, there is a clear area of agreement between them, and Third World feminism must also be founded on the ideas of the First World. The two systems ought to be seen as complementary. In the Third World, the concrete issues that women face and the patriarchal patterns of dominance vary depending on the variety of socio-cultural backgrounds, which is reflected in the writings of authors such as Emecheta, Nwapa, and Head.

The racial discrimination experienced by women of color has been largely disregarded by mainstream feminism. They focused only on the viewpoints and problems of white middle-class women. The struggles and challenges of women of colour have been ignored and even degraded in the agenda of the women's movement. They were concerned exclusively with improving the lot of the top group of white middle-class women. The white women were unwilling to renounce their white privilege and form a sisterhood with the black or Third World women. Important issues in the lives of women of color were left out by Whites.

The concept of womanism emerged from the African American community's emphasis on issues relevant to black women, and it emerged from the wide rifts in revolutionary movements that represented marginalized categories in terms of race and gender. First used in 1863, the term "womanism" had a meaning akin to that of "feminist." It became well-known after Alice Walker used it in her essay book *'In Search of Our Mothers Gardens': Womanist Prose*. Originally addressing the issues of Black women in the United States, the term "womanism" was used to refer to African American or Black feminism. Since then, the term "womanism" has evolved into a broad definition of feminism that transcends racial and class boundaries.

Black women and other women of color who could not connect with both black and white feminism found a place in the philosophy of womanism. As a result, womanism gave them a forum for discussion, a chance to voice their complaints, and a chance to start their movement.

Alice Walker is credited with providing a radical definition of the term, even going so far as to suggest that black women are somehow better than white women due to their unique black heritage. In this context, womanism is viewed as both superior to and distinct from feminism. It is possible to infer that womanism is a welcoming, affirming philosophy that values the experiences of women of color including Black women.

White women's struggles differ from those of women of color since these oppressive structures are woven throughout their lives. A revolutionary ideology, womanist politics seeks to address the issues facing marginalized women. Black feminist philosophy, then, reflects a multifaceted condition of layered consciousness that necessitates the in-depth study of the dynamics of gender, race, and class.

Womanism in Emecheta's Novels: The majority of African women authors, including Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, have stated that they are reluctant to identify as feminists. Buchi 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 women 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. (qtd. in Pandurang 118).

The vital traits of the African woman are reflected in Emecheta's characters, which range from pre-colonial to diasporic residents. Emecheta's and other postcolonial feminist works can be examined using the triple criterion of gender, race, and class. These three criteria constitute the spokes of the wheel of social status. A careful examination of the literature of the time can help us understand how the dominant authority attempts to assert its dominance. According to *The Joys of Motherhood*, Africans as a race experience gendering, and because they are reduced to the status of paid slaves, their standing in the social structure is appallingly low.

The narrative demonstrates the multifaceted forms of oppression that combined racial, class, and gender factors to depose the African nation as a colonized state and the women as doubly conquered people. As seen by the example of Nnu Ego raising her family by herself, women assume active roles typically associated with the male gender, while the nation and its men are depicted as an emasculated set. The dominant structures of colonialism and patriarchy oppress women both economically and biologically.

In the novel, *The Bride Price* the oppression of women is different. The novel's protagonist and heroine are parallel characters who each stand for oppression-double oppression, in society. Chike's double oppression is rooted in caste and race, but Akunna's is founded on race and gender. Emecheta's use of narrative style shapes the growth and rebellion of these repressed beings as well as their ultimate quest for liberation. In this instance, the novel's subaltern group attains a peripheral space of independence and selfhood. In *The Bride Price*, there is more candid and more interesting, preoccupation with those unresolved internal conflicts which are inseparable from the equally unresolved tensions between the rebellious woman and the status quo. Women and Nigerian society come face to face in this novel.

Black women continue to be double colonized on African land. Nnu Ego is a representation of it. Nnu Ego discovers that she is subservient to both her husband and their white bosses after being moved to Westernized Lagos. The representation of Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood* is a critique of postcolonial feminism. Since both postcolonialism and feminism discuss the duality of superior/inferior and power/powerlessness that characterize the global system, they share numerous points of intersection. There are similarities between the two ideologies, with the masculine gender calling the tune in the latter and the white race in the former. In both situations, the Black African woman is clearly viewed as inferior by the power dynamics that establish the rules of the game. The characters' lives are characterized by the stages of "othering," "ambivalence," and "hybridity," which are referred to as postcolonial circumstances. Chief Agbadi's daughter, Nnu Ego, unquestioningly accepts her lowly place in colonial Lagos.

The weaker segments of society are characterized by passivity and subordination due to the hegemonic nature of society. Women of the Black race live lives similar to those of animals if the race is labelled as such an inferior species. Black men's gendered response to their racial oppression places women at the bottom of a hierarchy of values, as they are twice colonized-first by white colonialism and then by black manhood.

Akunna in *The Bride Price* is an example of an older-generation heroine who fought for her existence. Throughout the book, Akunna's defiant stance comes to the fore when she is faced with difficult circumstances. Even after being deeply indoctrinated into African ideals, Akunna recognizes that she must overcome the manipulative powers of her oppressed society. Akunna was terrified by another thought that was racing through her head. She was starting to think that it was unfair that she could not make decisions for herself and was starting to despise her mother for being so indifferent to everything. (120). Emecheta seems to imply that the oppressed women's lives were partly caused by the earlier generation's women, who conformed to the expected feminine duties.

Once more, Akunna is militant and intends to commit suicide if she is abducted and forced to become Okoboshi's wife during this time. "She is not going to be a willing bed partner to somebody she did not love and who had never spoken a single kind word to her in her whole life". (BP 141). She mocks Okoboshi by claiming that she is not a virgin and that a slave, who narrowly avoided being raped by him that night, taught her what men taste like. In the story, Akunna appears to defend herself in this scenario, even if it means facing social rejection and death to shield her femininity from the harsh grip of traditional patriarchy. The soft-natured Akunna's enthusiastic response says a lot about the African woman's innate independence. Special attention should be paid to this pre-colonial element that was eradicated by colonial and patriarchal norms.

In her books, Emecheta makes many allusions to the history of African women. In *Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego, in her pathetic situation, transforms into a displaced schizophrenic who rebels against the restrictions imposed by patriarchal structures and longs to return to conventional security. Nnu Ego is depicted as being torn between two worlds; she cannot return to her mother Ona's pre-colonial society and, like her co-wife Adaku, she is unable to adjust to the rapidly evolving modern world. African women are shown as strong, powerful, and the embodiment of what it means to be a woman-a mother figure. In this realistic work, Emecheta captures the reality of the situation rather than the idealized view of African femininity. *Joys of Motherhood* stands out as a document of the social circumstances during the early phases of colonization of Africa. This is an example of the colonial world's transition from traditional mores to Westernized ways of living. The colonized Africans had sentiments of ambivalence as a result of the imported cultural values and outlook, which caused them to alternate between the old and the new world order regularly. The colonized's dislocated mindset results in hybrid mullattoes both physically and psychologically, as well as schizophrenic identities. Women experience double oppression based on racism and sexism, making this situation even more pitiful. It is therefore a multifaceted creature that ultimately takes on the form of the African lady.

Their urban one-room flat is too small to accommodate the polygamous family and the numerous children of the traditional way of life. Nnu Ego's plight is clear in her thoughts: - At least in Ibuza, "she would have her hut and would at least have been treated as befitting her position but here in Lagos ...she was faced with the harsh reality of making ends meet on a pittance" (137).

Similar to this, in the first few chapters of *The Bride Price*, the family is assimilated into the traditional customs and practices of Ibuza, the Ibo heartland, as well as the communal way of

life that is typical of African communities. Emecheta is identified by what psychologists refer to as the group mentality.

Missionaries and colonialism introduced education to the native population, including its women, giving African women access to a greater range of information and insight. Emecheta attributes the freeing element in African women's lives to education. Chike, the main character in *The Bride Price*, is the modernizing idea of the book and is revealed to favor a marriage between the sexes that is about equal in their lives together. In Ughelli, she is permitted to work and develop into an autonomous, self-governing spouse. The African womanist empowers and believes in her male counterpart. In summary, shifts in the conventional social order have led to an affiliative restructuring of gender roles and male-female relationships.

African womanist criticism has generally tended to develop an agenda that is dedicated to the survival and wholeness of all individuals, male and female. The goal of womanism is harmony and advancement. Despite being a movement for the emancipation of women of color, it also seeks to promote the fundamental unity of all races, whether they are black or white. Because it encourages the advancement of both men and women, it also adheres to a tolerant worldview as a step towards gender equality. The goal is the advancement of women, but the male of the species is also urged to break free from the chauvinistic caricature. Despite their similarities to feminist writing, womanist novels have unique characteristics, as demonstrated by Emecheta's case.

Conclusion: We might conclude that womanism emerged in response to the call of women of color to address issues that were ignored by the white feminist movement, particularly those that were essential to their everyday lives. Black feminism and womanism emerged as a result of the racism that the black woman and the white sisters experienced together. Therefore, the most pressing political demand of our day is the emancipation of women of color in the Third World from the various oppressive forces of gender, race, and class. The lived experiences of Black women demonstrate the legitimacy of the past, present, and future contributions to their opposition to racial and gender stereotypes. In this way, womanism affirms that women of color have a rich and complicated past, making them a source of celebration in the contemporary world.

Conclusion

In short Buchi Emecheta's novels portrays the real picture of African society, especially real image of African women. Her selected two novels shows how African women's are oppressed by gender, race and class. In her novels her heroines and other women characters are rebellious and they are challenging to the traditionally constructed gender roles and trying to reshaping the new roles for themselves. We might conclude that womanism emerged in response to the call of women of color to address issues that were ignored by the white feminist movement, particularly those that were essential to their everyday lives. Black feminism and womanism emerged as a result of the racism that the black woman and the white sisters experienced together. Therefore, the most pressing political demand of our day is the emancipation of women of color in the Third World from the various oppressive forces of gender, race, and class. The lived experiences of Black women demonstrate the legitimacy of the past, present, and future contributions to their opposition to racial and gender stereotypes. In this way, womanism

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