

Gender Preoccupations and Self-Discovery in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *The New Tribe* (2000)

Babacar Diakhaté*

Laboratoire d'Études africaines et postcoloniales Université Cheikh Anta Diop Dakar, Sénégal

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Corresponding author: Babacar Diakhaté

Abstract

When African countries gained independence, most African political leaders turned their back to their populations, and African male writers changed their topicality to political disillusionment. African female writers, included Buchi Emecheta, could no longer identify themselves with men's writings and started denouncing the hard living conditions of women, hence *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). After gender preoccupations, Emecheta publishes *The New Tribe* (2000) to address self-discovery. This article displays how Buchi Emecheta has shifted from "gender preoccupations" by castigating the irresponsible and incompetent fathers of family who do not take care of their wives and children to "universality".

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender, Identity, Discovery, Assertion.

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INTRODUCTION

Before independence Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Camara Laye, Ousmane Sembene, Kwame Ninsin respectively in *Things Fall Apart*, *A Dance of the Forest*, *The African Child*, *God's Bits of Woods* and *Towards Colonial Freedom* deal with cultural revival and political freedom. But after independence they shift to political disillusionment. While Achebe and all his counterpart male writers denounce a political system, African women writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Grace Ogot respectively in *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Efuru*, *So Long a Letter* and *The Promised Land* depict, through their heroines, the excruciating situations in which women are placed.

This article depicts the attitude of men, particularly the fathers of family who do not take their responsibilities towards their children and wives. Emecheta uses Nnu Ego in *the Joys of Motherhood* to denounce a patriarchal society through a "feminist" approach. Later, she releases *The New Tribe* in which she uses a heroine, Chester who quests for his identity. The first section displays the different displacements of Chester from England to Africa to find his origins. The second part is interested in the contributors to his quest. The last part lays emphasis on gender responsibilities through the protagonists Nnu Ego and her husband, Nnaife.

African Women Responsibilities, Challenges and "Transformations"

This section shows the final "transformation" of African women in their respective communities. It pinpoints the status of the modern African woman in a patriarchal society. Buchi Emecheta, one of the most outstanding and prolific representatives of African women writers, demonstrates the new responsibilities of women in their houses. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the author praises Nnu Ego for her efforts to feed her children and pay for their education. While she praises Nnu Ego, she castigates an incompetent father of family who stays at home sitting around. Nnu Ego suffers much. She works hard to take over from the family responsibilities. Oshia goes to USA without coming back home. He only returns home when his mother has died.

The more they are educated and integrated, the more women claim their rights and particularly the right to be and to become. In order to achieve both aims, they attempt to assess, create shorts of reflections about the new transformation of African women.

Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* reveals that African female writers and critics defend that colonialism accentuates and encourages rather than alleviates the subjugation of women. Emecheta's novel

begins with the opening line. It had all begun like a dream. In *Second-Class Citizen* Adah's dream becomes the reality that is largely the catalyst for the process of her transformation.

Nnu Ego and Adah recognize that transformation is accompanied by struggle. Each female character in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Joys of Motherhood* bears on a stifling situation her own peculiar way of solving the problem. Observers appreciate them for what they are and have become and not so much what they are supposed to be.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* when Nnaife is taken by "force" to the army, his co-wives successfully manage to take over from him and solve their financial problems. When Nnu Ego goes back to pay a visit to her dying father, Nnaife's second wife trades at the market with the money sent by her husband. Adaku's situation is different from that of Nnu Ego. The first has only a daughter to take care of. Whereas the second has many children and nobody apart from Mama Aby helps her. Despite their absent husbands, Adaku and Nnu Ego show the people that their social responsibilities can fit for men's shoes.

Contrary to Nnu Ego, Adah questions the values of her community. This questioning leads Adah to a transformation. Yet, her intellectual confidence does not preclude her from emotional conflict and pain. Although she anticipates the cost of her freedom and self-determination she resolves not to be a victim of a common syndrome. She finds herself alone, forced into a situation dictated by a society in which she had little choice. In *The Joys of Motherhood* Nnu Ego is able to loosen those bonds in a more radical way, especially with regard to the birth of her daughter Kehinde who rejects her marriage with a Yoruba.

Adah and Nnu Ego had to marry not only to escape from criticisms but also to show their capacity of giving birth to children and being seen as authentic African women. Marriage carries with it the potential for great fulfilment and frustration. Later her marriage becomes the saddest day in her life. Marriage frees Adah to continue her studies, but later it frustrates her.

Furthermore, African women are transformed thanks to western education. A reading of Emecheta's novel requires a consideration of the role of education which Petersen considers as a contributor to their final social status. She insists on education and middle class values as a means of women emancipation. Oshia and Adah's long preoccupation with the value of an education is first nurtured when they are little persons. Second when they realise that school was something the Igbos never played with.

Francis's failure to pay any sum for the bride price and Nnaife's incapacity to take in charge of the

house illustrate man's weakness. Oshia endeavours to complete his studies, exhibits much tenacity and determination. He earns a reputation among his peers as "the Igbo tigress". Similarly, Adah's dream of an education that would enable her to read classics and teach at the end of it. For Francis and Nnaife, leaving Africa to achieve the dream of becoming an aristocrat has become a reality of being black. Hence, Emecheta's novels such as *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second-Class Citizen* problematize the Afro-centrism.

Displacements and Self-Discovery Process

Chester expresses his will to identify with others. The "orphan's" good image is essential to personal ingredient of personal happiness. *The New Tribe* is a narrative in which the protagonist is in a perpetual quest of identity. Chester is a young marooned Nigerian boy who is picked up by a newspaper boy and finally given to the Vicars in order to be taken care of. The Vicars represent his foster parents and Chester decides to stay in this white family comprised of Reverend Arthur Arlington, his wife Ginny and the white adopted daughter, Julia. When he grows up, Chester moves from them to seek his roots.

Chester is the only black child in St Simon. Buchi Emecheta's description of St Simon is "one of the biggest towns". The inhabitants accept Chester as the Arlington's son. Chester is always selected to play a part of the leader of the three wise kings. As a teenager, Chester works in a summer resort where he first encounters Enoch Ugwu, a Nigerian with his children. His family consists of Mrs. Millers, the mother of Chester's best friend.

Chester leaves the Arlington's and St Simon for Liverpool to live with Ugwu. In this environment, he is able to quest who he is and where he comes from. Chester observes Enoch and says *what real fathers do* [1]. Chester's quest for identity does not prevent him from carrying on his education. As he becomes Chester's guide in a wider context, Enoch is the first person who tells him that he is a Nigerian boy. He asks: *Mr Ugwu, how do you know I am a Nigerian... is that your problem* [2].

Despite the ordeals he experiences, Chester is very devoted to his quest. His stay in England opens out many untold things. He strikes up relationship with another African. Thanks to Jimoh, Chester is able to go back to Africa. He works with Jimoh in England to eke out a living and also earn some money for his family in Nigeria. The two characters have swapped passports. Chester goes to Nigeria to search for his half remembered village.

Emecheta describes Chester's perceptions of Nigeria in terms that convey his position as an outsider. He is perplexed by the world he apprehends rather than finding any type of home. Here "home" refers to a place

where mother, father, brothers and sisters live together. Chester eventually realizes that his memory of a Nigerian village is actually a memory of a book that Ginny had made for him as a child. All Chester's historical background is in it.

In *The New Tribe* Emecheta addresses identity formation. In *The New Tribe*, *Song of Solomon* and *Swallow*, the transformation of Chester, Milkman and Enitan from naivety to maturity may be analysed as a complete reconstruction of their moral attitudes towards their relatives and societies. Naivety refers to the period when these above-cited characters ignore who they really are. It is when they do not know neither their ancestors nor where they come from. Maturity is when a feeling of "rebellion" overwhelms the characters. When he or she wants to know who he or she really is. Individuals realize that the future cannot be quite wonderful if they do not get engaged in the quest for their origins. The quest for identity takes the characters from a state of naivety, stage of ignorance, inexistence, to a state of maturity, stage of awareness and consciousness.

In *The Housemaid* Amma Darko explores the theme of the quest for identity through Efi. The latter gets engaged in prostitution and finally becomes pregnant. She has no other alternative but getting back where she comes from. Most of the female characters who go to cities for a better life eventually become prostitutes if they do not have a good rural upbringing. Like Amma Darko in *The Housemaid*, in *Maimouna* Abdoulaye Sadji addresses the question of loss of identity and self-discovery. Maimouna is overwhelmed with the urge to go to Dakar to join her sister. She is influenced by the city life, which finally diverts her from the right track. Remarkably, after her impregnacy she goes back to her village.

Like Maimouna, Efi and Enitan, Tolani also thinks that the quest for identity and origin may be the solution to her problems. Enitan and Tolani respectively in *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* have been in England to search for knowledge but finally they get engaged in self-discovery and assertion. They encounter many difficulties brought about by their husbands or boyfriends. Enitan decides to go back to Nigeria to support her father.

The hero's withdrawal in the basement may be perceived as a purgative cultural ordeal meant to prepare himself for an upward movement and action. After self-discovery, Chester sees himself in different ways: his status before she discovers his parents and his new status after the discovery of his parents.

Buchi Emecheta shows the necessity of leaping back one's grand-parents in order to discover one's origin and identity. She uses the motif of search, which triggers off a return to one's roots. Chester's self-

discovery involves his attempt to achieve self-assertion. With the help of Ginny, Ugwu and Jimoh, he discovers his geographical ancestry. Chester's self-awareness is a retrospective tale told by Ginny and his growing maturation. Self-discovery is Chester's long struggle compensation. The search for identity is human beings privilege that post-colonial writers are concerned about. Chester leaves the street in order to identify with another place where he feels at home.

Identity seeking is somehow associated with displacements. The obvious interpretation of the theme of identity in the characters' obsession with having a place in the external world like England, leads them to a perpetuate quest. The poor character strives to be regarded as a true member in real societies.

Yearning for identity is synonymous with the quest for self-respect. The character's humanity is his or her awareness of their identity and culture. Besides, the first characteristic of the human condition lays in nature, culture and identity. The individual shows first that he is a human being, which is consecutive to self-respect.

Individuals cannot be respected without cultural and personal identities. The passion of the outside world creates a hopeful dream pushing poor characters to undertake travels to Europe. According to Chester and Tolani the external world is the suitable place for self-assessment and achievement.

Education plays a useful role in the quest of identity in Emecheta's writings. It is associated with the search for identity. Chester's education has contributed a lot to his self-knowledge. He is educated because one of his best friends known as Ray used to urge him to work in the Mill to pay for his school year's tuitions.

Contributors and Helpers to self-Assertion

Chester has many advisers like Ugwu and Jimoh. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego and Oshia have got orientations from Mama Abby. In *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* respectively Enitan and Tolani have received suggestions from their respective friends, Sheri and Rose. Moreover, Jimoh who swappes passport with Chester gives the young boy reliable information to help him achieve his aim. Ugwu stimulates Chester in his quest for identity's process.

Advisors

The contributions of some individuals to the formation of the protagonist are illustrated by Buchi Emecheta. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the presence of "old or experienced women" in the lives of "orphaned" characters have contributed to their final results. Nnu Ego is known to all her neighbors through her capacity of begetting children. When she is in labor to give birth to another child, nobody helps her deliver. By the time, Oshia suffers from malnutrition. Fortunately, Mama

Abby comes to help her by preparing a pepper soup. Mama Abby symbolizes the mother-figure. She contributes to Oshia and his mother's survival.

Moreover, in *Beyond the Horizon* Mama Kiosk plays the same role by putting Mara on the right track to become a "modern woman". Mara is Akobi's wife who comes from the village, Naka. Mara experiences physical and moral violences from her husband. Mama Kiosk makes her aware of her humanity. The role played by Mama Abby for Nnu Ego and Oshia in *The Joys of Motherhood* is similar to Duronjaiye's in *Swallow* and Mama Kiosk's in *Beyond the Horizon*. The presence of these instructed and emancipated women is essential. Rural women are always victims of physical and moral violence. Emancipated modern women's role is to make the rural and illiterate women aware of their conditions and sensitize them to fight against a patriarchal system.

This sociability is visible in *The New Tribe*, *Song of Solomon*, *Swallow* and *Beyond the Horizon* respectively between, Chester and Esther, Milkman and "Pilot", Tolani and Duronjaiye and Mara and Mamakiosk. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the Pieces of advice are mostly given when Nnu Ego's incompetent husband, Nnaife is far away from home fleeing the houses demands.

The role played by Circe during Milkman's quest is the same role that Jimoh plays for Chester. Jimoh gives his passport to Chester so as to enable him to shuttle back and forth between Africa and England. Like Milkman, Chester, Enitan and Nnu Ego respectively in *Song of Solomon*, *The New Tribe*, *Everything Good Will Come* and *The Joys of Motherhood* all these characters have received supports and advice from people around them.

U.Turn Making or Return to Origins

Chester's quest for identity results in the accomplishment of self-knowledge as he meets Ugwu and his family. Chester's case is assimilated to Samba Diallo's in *Ambiguous Adventure*. Gradually, he loses most of his habits and traditional spiritual practices. He questions about his native place. Samba Diallo is a cross-cultural figure who leaves Africa with all his spiritual values to settle in Europe. He gets rid of his spirituality because he no longer prays. Fortunately, he travels back to Africa in order to recover his spiritual values.

Both Samba Diallo and Chester undergo many similar evils created by the effects of colonialism. Chester is from Africa and all his relatives are

Nigerians, whereas Samba Diallo belongs to a good reputed Toucouleur family. When characters are lost, their only solution is to make a U-turn. They think that a return to the sources is a remedy to their unknown past. As Lucy puts:

Why claim a thing like that? I myself had Indian blood in me. My grand-mother is Carib Indian that makes me one quarter Carib Indian. But I don't go around saying that I have some Indian blood in me. The Carib Indian was good sailors, but I don't like to be on the sea, I only like to look at it [3].

The invisibility of Chester is when she does not know his roots. But she is accepted by the society that refuses to see him. Milkman, Tolani and Chester find their origins thanks to Pilate Dead, Jimoh and Ugwu. They finally discover their geographical roots and genealogical ancestors. Milkman's discovery is the song he memorizes in Shalimar. Similarly, Chester's written history of his ancestors found by Esther helps him achieve his quest. The letter given to Tolani by her father's brother contributes to her self-knowledge.

CONCLUSION

African literature consists of male and female writers dealing respectively with political disillusionment and gender politics. However, African female writers feel that their male counterpart writers are not concerned about their situations. They start denouncing their predicaments, hence *the Joys of Motherhood* in which the heroin, Nnu Ego takes the household responsibilities at the expense of an incompetent father of family.

Later, she releases *The New Tribe* to use a heroine, Chester who quests for his origins. In the process of his journeys to self-discovery, there are some contributors who make the protagonist's dreams come true. These contributors are people like Jimoh, Mama Aby, Duronjaiye, Sheri and Mama Kiosk respectively in *The New Tribe*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Swallow*, *Everything Good Will Come* and *Beyond the Horizon*. They allow the African characters to regain their freedom and assert themselves.

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