

## MUTATIONS AND THE QUEST OF NEW IDENTITY IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S FICTION

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**Abstract :** Emecheta's works revolve around the role of African women. This article, therefore aims to identify, through a feminist analysis, the transformations resulting from the change in space, European criteria that substitutes African norms and the role of modern women in this new living environment. Through this work, we understand that the cultural changes are closely linked to women's new living space. For Emecheta, the change of space is a perpetual departure, which implies new challenges, namely the quest for success, emancipation and social identity.

**Key words:** African women, modernism, domestic duties, traditional beliefs.

**Résumé :** Le travail d'Emecheta s'articule autour du rôle de la femme africaine. Cet article a donc pour objectif d'identifier à travers une analyse féministe, les transformations consécutives au changement de l'espace, des critères européens qui substituent les modèles africains et le rôle des femmes moderne dans ce nouveau cadre de vie. Au moyen de ce travail, nous comprenons que les changements de comportement de la femme due à la civilisation occidentale, en passant par l'éducation, sont étroitement liés à son nouvel espace de vie. Pour Emecheta, le changement d'espace est un perpétuel départ qui implique de nouveaux défis à savoir la quête du succès, de l'émancipation et de l'identité sociale.

**Mots clés :** Femmes africaines, modernisme, tâches domestiques, croyances traditionnelles

### Introduction

In colonial Africa, women have always been considered as inferior people whose role is procreation and domestic tasks. This role assigned to women has become an integral part of traditional values so that those who want to do away with it are rejected by the community. In colonial Nigeria, traditional values were central to the society's life. But, modernity, education and the Western way of

life, contradict tradition, resulting in conflict between the two forces. This is what Emecheta tries to explain when she links immigration to the disruption of traditional beliefs. Alder & Gielen (2003p.4), posit that "migration has been responsible for the fall of the civilizations and the rise of others".

The objective of this paper is to analyse how the author defines the new roles assigned to African women in an unfamiliar environment. We intend to demonstrate the impact of modernism on women. We will also reflect on the resistance of some African men to change and their social resignation.

The analysis will attempt to study the characters and the space. The study is grounded on feminist theory. Feminism is considered appropriate because it is aimed at empowering women in the society, and stresses the need for the women to challenge the status quo with a view to liberating themselves from the oppressive African men. Our work focuses on the mutations of the main characters and the quest for a new identity. The evolution of the characters, in relation to each other and to themselves, depends on space and time. The spaces depicted in the text have a close relationship with the characters, and the characters by their movement, provide them with meaning. We will also examine the new role of the migrant African woman. The work has three sections. The first is entitled "**Nnu Ego as seen in Ibuza and London**", then the second part deals with "**London: towards women's emancipation**", and the last part will expose "**the African couple collapse**".

### 1. Nnu Ego as seen in Ibuza and Lagos

In Emecheta's novels, Ibuza<sup>15</sup>'s socio-political organisation, beliefs and ethics are strongly represented. It is the landmark of the Ibo tradition. Emecheta introduces us to the world of the Ibo women, which she knows very well as she is from Ibuza as attests her biography on the cover of her books "*Second Class*

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<sup>15</sup> Ibuza, the small town in Delta State of Nigeria that Emecheta made famous in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The name "Ibuzo" is an Anglicization of Igbuzo and/or Ibuzo "Igbo bi n'uzo", meaning the Igbos that live by the wayside or "Were you the first to settle here?"

*Citizen, The Joys of Motherhood*". Buchi Emecheta was born of Ibuza parentage in Lagos, Nigeria in 1944". At the beginning of each novel she delineates her novelistic space with Ibuza as base. It was therefore in Ibuza that Nnu Ego was born.

(...) had she not been told many times at home in Ibuza that her chi was a slave woman who had been forced to die with her mistress when the latter was being buried? So the slave woman was making sure that Nnu Ego's own life was nothing but a catalogue of disaster. Emecheta (1979 p.9)

To understand Nnu Ego's life, it is crucial to examine her life in an Igbo village before she made her journey to Lagos. Among the Igbo, a person's chi is essentially her life force. Nnu Ego considers her chi as that of a slave woman. This woman who is forced to be buried alive as a sacrifice, will return to torment Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego thinks that all the misfortunes that happen to her are caused by her chi. Ibuza thus became a place of torture for Nnu Ego since her marriage fails and she cannot procreate. Due to this belief, Nnu Ego becomes trapped into thinking she will never escape her plight.

"O my chi, why do you have to bring me so low? Why must I be punished? I am sorry for what my father did and I am sure he is sorry too. But try to forgive us.' Many a night she cried tears of frustration and hopelessness" Emecheta (1979 p.32)

Influenced by her traditional beliefs, Nnu Ego strongly believes in the presence of Chi<sup>16</sup> in the life of each person. This spiritual presence is demonstrated in physical life through misfortune or joyful events.

In Ibuza, the traditional world of women is governed by an absolute decree that is a total submission to social norms. Women have no right to break the rules otherwise they will be punished. Consequently, women in Ibuza cannot enjoy their own individuality, because the slightest demands are stifled. But they must prove that they are good daughters and then good wives in order to gain

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<sup>16</sup>According to Richard Henderson "chi" is the life conceived as an animate self that directs the course of one's existence. It is therefore said that when an individual is born, he/she makes a pact with a particular essential being (chi) who selects his/her length of time on earth and procures his destiny. See *The King in Every Man* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1972), p. 107.

respect. Every single woman must experience the joy of motherhood which consists in bearing children especially male one otherwise she is incomplete and a failure. Nnu Ego cries day and night begging her personal God to give her a child like her co-wife and change her miserable fate. She said:

"Why don't you let me have my own children? Look I am full of milk. I can't be barren or juiceless as my father said why you are so wicked to me? Why did you not come to me? I cried in the night and longed for a child like you- why did you not come to me? " Emecheta (1979 p.25).

It is obvious that women get a privileged place in Ibuza when they can bear children. The barren woman is ashamed of herself and hides to avoid being insulted. Ibuza's traditional beliefs make the woman a withdrawn, lonely and guilt-ridden being. Fertility is a determinant factor of a woman's status and reputation.

Another thing to know about Ibuza is the sexual division of labor. Nnaife, Nnu Ego's husband only speaks of tradition when it is in his favour. He forgets that, if he was in Ibuza, he would lose respect among his people because a man is not supposed to wash the clothes of a woman or clean the house, which are women's jobs. Men were defined as breadwinner while women do house chores and bear children. For example when Adaku asks Oshia, a male child and Dumbi, a female child to go and fetch water from the tap, Oshia replies:

Oshia declines to play with his friends but Nnaife adds to this problem by instructing him to "go out and stop listening to female gossip" (p.128).

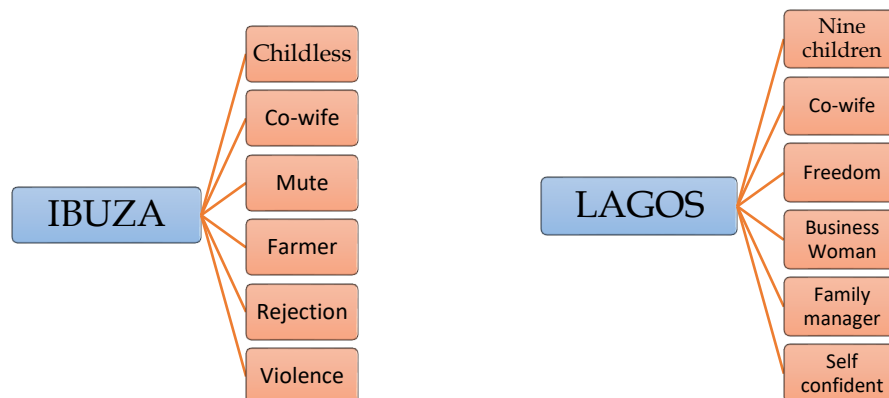
"I am not going! I am a boy, why should I help in the cooking? That's a woman's job" Oshia declines to play with his friends but Nnaife adds to this problem by instructing him to "go out and stop listening to female gossip" Emecheta (1979 p.128).

In *Second Class Citizen*, The community in which Adah was born believes that girls are inferior to boys. Born a lesser sex and Adah is deprived of education, other facilities and advantages of life while everything goes in favor of her younger brother. She came when people expected and predicting a baby boy. Therefore, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate

family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was so insignificant.

Another superstition in Ibuza is the conflicting relation between money and children. Money and children don't go together: "if you spend all your time making money and getting rich, the gods would not give you any children; if you wanted children, you have to forget money and be content to be poor" Emecheta (1979 p.80). Being a mother and working could not go together in Ibuza. Women have to choose between motherhood and work. Adah and Nnu Ego are locked into their roles as mother and wife. Life for them is a life of domestic work. Nnu Ego is frustrated, she then cries out in distress: "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" Emecheta (1979 p.26).

Ego's life can be restored as follow:



Lagos, undergoes political, economic, social and other changes as the result of the colonial domination, follows the capitalist economic policies.

When we analyse Nnu Ego's life in Ibuza and Nigeria, we notice some similarities, for example Nnu Ego has a co-wife both in Ibuza and Nigeria. But in general she has opportunities to be happier in Lagos than in Ibuza. Happy in her marriage, she has no pressure, no stress, and no strain. In Lagos, the protagonist becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son Ngozi. No one will criticise her for having a boy or a girl, in Lagos she feels free. She can have as many children as she wants. In Lagos, no one judges her on her status as a woman.

In Lagos, Nnu Ego is free to choose the job that suits her. She can do her business and contribute to the family's expenses. She is able to make extra incomes at her market stall. She develops financial independence and can assert herself. She pays her children's school fees and keep them clothed and fed. She also instilled an entrepreneurial spirit in all her children. She taught them to fight for survival.

Yes, I have many children but, what do I have to feed them on? On my own 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. Emecheta (1979 p.187).

Another change that occurs in the protagonist's life is the opportunity to send her children to school. Despite her traditional beliefs, she has made her children her priority. She has invested her finances and energy to ensure a better future for them. Nnu Ego has worked day and night to help her children have all the best advantages and succeed in life. She got two boys, Oshia and Adim. Oshia works as a research scientist and wins a scholarship to study in United States. Whereas Adim leaves Nigeria to pursue his education in Canada.

The change of space has allowed the protagonist to develop certain skills such as business management, responsibility, dynamism and family management. She also gained confidence and freedom that she did not have in Ibuza. In the next part we will analyse the case of another heroine, Adah, who managed to stand out despite the hostility of her new space.

## **2. London : toward women's emancipation**

London is fragmented on purely racial grounds. In London the spatial organization illustrates the opposition between the different social strata. There is an opposition between the space of men of color and that of whites. In the novel, there are words and expressions used to describe and qualify the two spaces. For the immigrants, we note words like (half-room, second hand heater slum, rubbish dump, burial ground, desolate air, children litter, and old, crowded,

filthy, shabby...). On the other hand, when it comes to the whites, we hear positive words such as (beautiful, pure, clean, flowers, terrace-houses, beautiful-tented gardens, cosy and warm...) It is in an almost hostile environment that Adah struggled to survive. In London their house was cramped:

Then Francis opened one door and showed a room, or a half room. It was very small with a single bed at one end and a new settee. (...) The space between the settee and the bed was just enough for a formal topped table. Emecheta (1974p. 26)

The lack of space becomes a handicap for the couple. They cannot even rest after a hard day's work. Adah's new space does not provide any well-being. She is confined to a space with children and a husband. Adah begins to notice that England is quite different from the fairyland of her dreams. In addition to the unattractive environment, Francis becomes a burden to Adah as he resigns his role as a father and abandons his wife. From the time she arrives in Britain, Adah tries at first to support the family. She takes care of the home but Francis's desire is only to have more children. Adah confronts him with this domestic problem and Francis becomes aggressive and starts brutalizing her. She pays the rent for Francis's course.

"Adah's pay at work was just enough to pay the rent for Francis's course, his examination fees, buy his books and pay Trudy. They had little left after this and so it was impossible for Adah to have lunch at work". Emecheta (1974p.62)

He is even afraid that his wife might be more excellent than he is: "Do you think our marriage will last if I allow Adah to go and work for the Americans? Her pay will be three times my own. My colleagues at work will laugh at me. What do you think I should do"? Emecheta (1974p. 26) As long as a woman earns only a small part of the family income, all is well, but if she starts earning more money, it can create stress for the husband. Emecheta argues that although traditional notions of appropriate work for men and women have changed, women are still expected to take on roles that prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

Adah feels isolated because she does not understand her surroundings. Her family has no interest in family relationships. So she cannot communicate

with them and cannot receive any attention from them. She remains the sole provider. This is what keeps Francis at home: "He had told her that he married her in the first place because she could work harder than most girls" Emecheta (1974 p. 37).

Unlike Nnu Ego who refuses to make friends, in London, Adah meets a friend in Ashdown Street who is willing to listen to her and share her difficulties when she is rejected by her own Yoruba brothers. This friend is Janet, a stranger who helps her to overcome her hard times. The change in environment requires a new mindset, new connections and an open mind. And Adah has really managed to open herself up to the outside world.

In the hospital where she gave birth, Adah made friends very easily. All the women in the hospital, including the great surgeon and his staff, treated her cordially during her stay. And it is the same atmosphere that prevails with the women who clean the public toilets. She finally finds a job and makes very good friends. Unfortunately, she suffers from the indifference of her husband, who still does not work and does not assist her even when she has given birth. Adah starts being against Francis when she realizes that he does not care for her but for himself.

She takes refuge in her professional relationships. These relations help her forget her painful married life. Susan Gardner (1998 p.161) rightly states that "a girl is not a failure. A woman needs not to be defined by marriage and above all motherhood; the woman who supports herself depends on men less". In this environment, she finds joy in work. For example, at Chalk Farm Library, she spends delicious and enriching moments of her career. She gains experience in her friends' company and can look forward to the future:

All in all, Adah was happy, she would get a first class job; she was happy that her colleagues at work liked her, she was happy that she was enjoying her work. Emecheta (1974p. 43)

Adah understood that roles undergo transformations according to space. In Ibuza, while women abandon their activity, women in Europe entrust their



children to nannies. Most Nigerians, send their children away to Foster-parents. Adah has personally decided not to comply with this requirement because she prefers to take care of her children that she sends to an English school despite their poverty and the fact that she is black. Her courage and perseverance allow her to succeed. She rants: “Second-class citizens could keep their children with them, but just look at the price they had to pay” Emecheta (1974 p.50). Adah’s marital life takes a bad turn. She refuses to give in to the whims of her husband who wants to use traditional beliefs to oppress her. In London she has a good job, a good salary and good relationship. She takes control of her destiny and she fulfils her dream of being a writer and took charge of her children.

Adah seizes the opportunities available to her in London. The advantages of this new space allowed her to be an intellectual and independent woman. But what about the husbands of the protagonists? Will this empowerment of women be without damage?

### **3. Divorce in the african couple**

Through the characters of Nnu Ego and Adaku, Emecheta contrasts traditionalism and modernism. On the one hand, Adaku, who embodies modern life, is free and asserts herself as a woman; on the other hand, Nnu Ego, who embodies tradition, drowns in her culture. Adaku is disappointed by her husband's behaviour. Her position as a second wife frustrates her and she eventually leaves the marriage to become an independent woman, a trader and prostitute. She earns a lot of money, and she is not dependent on any man, she just enjoys their company. In the past, divorce or separation within a couple was an accepted practice. When a man repudiated his wife, she returned to her family and her dowry was given back to her parents. She must not bring the children as they belong to the father. But Adaku, educates her daughters herself, because she believes that one day an educated woman will be able to earn a salary on a par with a man.

Nnu Ego does not approach any other woman for fear of losing her beliefs. She confines herself to her own world and judges those like Adaku who make friendships. In Adaku's own words, she is "going to live with those women in Montgomery Road. Yes, I'm going to join them" Emecheta (1979 p.168). "Live with those women," "join them" – these words present a comparatively better scenario than what can be seen in Nnaife's household, where the children are underfed and cramped together, where the women do all the work but are never appreciated. She is not influenced by any external factors.

Adaku resembles another character in Ousmane Sembene's novel, *God's Bits of Wood*. Her name is Penda, she is described as an independent woman who decides to follow her own beliefs. At the beginning of the novel, Penda is depicted as a woman who alienates herself from the community. She refuses to be bound by convention, and instead of selecting a spouse and having a family, she indulges in sexual escapades with any man who pleases her. Penda, viewing marriage as a trap, decides to remain single.

In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah divorces her husband Francis to pursue her ambition and to be a woman free from oppression. Her family life frustrates her, but her professional life on the other hand brings her a lot of joy. She counts herself among the first class citizens and can even look forward to a bright future. At home, she has no radio, no television; she does not read the newspapers because Francis thinks it is a waste of money. It is for example at the subway station that she learns about the railway workers' strike.

Expressing herself through art allows her to free herself from some of the abuses and beliefs of African society. In writing, Adah disconnects herself from certain African superstitions and creates an atmosphere of freedom and self-fulfilment. Unfortunately, this ambition motivated by her readers is fought by her husband. Adah would have realized a dream but Francis burned her writings. Francis is driven by jealousy, envy and malice to destroy his wife's drafts. Francis makes no effort to adapt. He complains about their house being so cramped. He has no professional relationship. He creates a barrier between his

entourage and himself. "The gulf between them which had grown with her stay in hospital had been made deeper" Emecheta (1974 p. 165). To cap it all, the women in the house address wrote Adah an open petition begging her to control her husband, because he was chasing them all. Adah, finally understands that she has an animal in front of her that is spoiling her life. She decides to put an end to her marriage with Francis. She told herself it was impossible to live with such a man.

Moving from one space to another implies a change in behaviour. Unfortunately neither Nnaife nor Francis are able to adapt to their new space. Nnaife clings to traditional beliefs and refuses to play his role as a father. Francis is baffled and embittered, rejecting European values and clinging to African values which Adah finds outdated in relation to their new space. Despite the fact that she is black and poor, Adah struggled to find a place in Europe.

Buchi Emecheta's works reveal her commitment to the cause of African women and her concern for their freedom.

## **Conclusion**

By a way of conclusion, feminist literary criticism allowed us to become aware of African women's experiences. This exploration provided clues that highlighted the relationships between the characters with other elements such as traditional and modern space. Emecheta exposes many of the female vicissitudes, which make the marital home a melting pot of many misunderstandings, exposing the weaknesses of the male character. The divorce between Nnaife and Adaku, Adah and Francis, shows how husbands are sometimes irresponsible and callous.

Spatial change should not be a handicap for African women. Every woman should be able to integrate and impose her femininity. Change is an asset which allows African women to show their skills and take up new challenges. African

women must embrace modern life and make a privileged place for themselves. Emecheta leads us to a feminine vision of the world that transcends all social, racial and cultural boundaries.

In Africa, women are faced with many challenges such as poverty, economic inequality and political exclusion. The participation of women in the economy is a great asset for the development of the continent. Unfortunately, traditional beliefs continue to infect African society, which gives very little place to women. This can be seen on the economic, health, educational and social levels. It is therefore obvious that the construction of a new personality for women must be achieved through western education and the rejection of certain traditional cultures.

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