Emecheta's Social Vision: Fantasy or Reality

by
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"If the 'woman question' seems trivial," writes Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal contributions to the discourse on the gender problem, "it is because masculine arrogance has made it a 'quarrel'; and when quarreling one no longer reasons well."[1] This observation was relevant about fifteen years ago when it was written. It remains relevant today anywhere and at any time the gender debate is on. As a double-edged indictment, it encourages a positive posture for constructive and reformist thinking over sexist or feminist issues. The art of writing being a public art, we need not over-emphasize the necessity of grace and decorum. This means that, like dancers, we must be physically equipped to dance well because the Igbo say that a deformed public performer is looking for a person who will say something.

Some Igbo writers involved in the feminist question are looking for a person who will say something. This is because, superficially, and from a hindsight that we often over-dramatize, there are many problems in male-female relationships in Igbo society. Among other things, our polygamous practices appear to reduce women to the status of chattels; our fathers dominated our mothers; girls do not have the same kind of opportunities as boys; some marital encounters are unfortunate and traumatic; sexual relationships are unromantic, and women are in the shadows during crucial matters affecting the destiny of the group. The Igbo world and its peculiar burdens are supposedly constituted by such strands. The problem of the Igbo artist who claims to function in the service of truth for the development of the society is to explore the many faces of these truths, reveal how and where they hurt or sooth us so that we could, in stride with history, proverbially get out of the rain that is beating us.

In Female Novelists of Modern Africa, Olade Taiwo states that:

> Buchi Emecheta writes to fulfill the urge for women to speak for themselves. Although other African women are writing novels, her attempt must be considered a significant literary intervention whose content and approach deserve attention.[2]

Emecheta has received this attention from critics such as Katherine Frank, Carol Boyce Davies, Mary Linton Umeh and others who, significantly, are women. As much as Emecheta is applauded by these critics, she is also seriously criticized for her lopsidedness. The reason behind this ambivalence lies in Eustace Palmer's insight:

> There will be many who will find Emecheta's analysis of the female situation controversial; her presentation may not be able to stand up to sociological scrutiny.[3]

The question of sociological scrutiny returns us to the question of truth and who that truth is representing. It seems to me that in dealing with the problems of African societies as they respond to the buffets of alien influences, few choices are open to the writer: to be noncommittal, committed or selfish. There is nothing essentially wrong with these artistic postures or strategies as long as they satisfy our private and individual predilections, and as long as we are willing to accept whatever consequences attend our reputations as a result of such choices. For writers everywhere, the first problem of creativity is how to escape from the subjective tangle of private experience to the more universal and representative emotional experiences through which the human condition is better understood and appreciated. Emecheta appears to be engaged in this problematic struggle from her first to the most recent works. Whether one considers her successful or otherwise will, as usual in criticism, depend upon the attitudes, sensitivity and disposition of the individual based on our general understanding of the largely moribund or transitory Igbo culture in which most of her works are couched.

Emecheta's early works, Second Class Citizen and In the Ditch, constitute one tale of courage in the face of adversity, of inventiveness and resilience for a stockaded will. According to one Igbo proverb, an old woman said that when a hill brings waist pain, she will bring going and standing a bit. Ada, the heroine of those early works, brings more than going and standing a bit for the uphill circumstances which she deals with in her life -- a selfish, diffident, uninspiring, weak-willed and yet oppressive husband, a hostile and racist environment; and a gathering of seedy, timid and unenterprising fellow nationals, culture-shocked and dehumanized into silence and inertia.

Certainly, most readers are bound to share in Ada's triumph, which in a positive and universal sense, represents the triumph of the human will. African readers are also bound to appreciate the author's occasional critical darts at some of our cultural excesses and

irrationalities. All readers will locate here and there certain questions about civilized man's pretensions and hypocrisy when his much touted theory of universal Christian brother hood is juxtaposed against the visible lack of humanism in his relationship with his fellow man. Laced together with Ada's experiences, such familiar questions assume new urgency, new and arresting relationships with our sensibility. This freshness is a forte, but alas a double-edged one.

The quality of those early works are vitiated, in their freshness, by the constant intrusion of the bitterness of private experience. This has been defended by some readers who insist that an autobiographical work is distinguished by such frankness. This defense is weak-kneed. An autobiography is like a spiritual experience. Its attendant handicap is skepticism because there is no other witness except the subject. A strategy of perception and expression which replaces caution and delicacy with trenchant abrasion reneges the wisdom in another Igbo proverb: When laughter accompanies cutting of body with knife, it looks as if knife does not hurt the body.

In the heart of Second Class Citizen and In the Ditch rages a fierce contest between man and woman. The final images from the welter of those two forms is a beaten man, a wimp. The woman is the triumphant spirit. She is cut for it any way "with a rather Cleopatra type of prettiness, square face and determined chin. . ."[4] The heroine is certain, just as the landlady's neighbor in her tale, that "the whole race of men were beasts . . ."[p.150] It is no surprise that in the triumphant conclusion of her vicissitudes "under her breath she cursed all [my emphasis] African men for treating women the way they do." [p.235]

In The Bride Price, a more forward-looking novel in terms of commitment to the ideal of partnership between man and women, Emecheta attempts to recapture the falling apart of traditional culture. Lagos, the city at the spear-point of contact with western culture, reflects the attendant confusion: "Lagos culture was such an unfortunate conglomeration of both that you ended up not knowing to which you belonged."[5] Authorial vision emphasizes this confusion in the constant comparisons made between traditional and foreign, such as we find in the depiction of religious attitudes and images:

> The heaven of Christians was new and foreign; anything imported was considered to be much better than their own old ways. (p. 42).

> . . . He went on jibbering, his eyes closed, his mouth foaming. His incantations assumed that particular whoop and call of a forest nation dancing in file (p. 46).

The death of Pa Odia and the retreat of his wife Ma Blackie with the children to the more secure and predictable rural environs of Ibuza is a signal for a process of rebirth represented by the future aspirations of a new breed, Chike and Akunna. Tradition breaks the pair but not before they demonstrate that deep and unconditional affection between man and woman is possible. As in her first novels, the nucleus of action again is man and woman. The collapse of society and the author's social criticism is directed at men as we find in this sarcastic authorial intrusion:

> It is so even today in Nigeria. When you have lost your father, you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family. Such traditions do not change very much (p.28).

The murk and anguish in The Bride Price is redeemed through the courageous actions of Chike and Akunna who reject the social restrictions of caste and class for the freedom in true love and marriage.

The Bride Price is peopled with sexually wild and profligate young men, authoritarian and irrational fathers or husbands whose only activities and interests lie in the reduction of girls or their daughters to sex objects and merchandise. Emecheta does not spare them with authorial barbs and aspersions. Okolie in The Slave Girl, is another male creation of the author who is a replacement at the author's shooting range. He is a funnel for evil and a community diabolical monolith. Without his existence, the depraved earth goddess of The Slave Girl, Ma Palagada, would have been engaged in other means of survival other than slave merchandizing. As in The Bride Price, the author tries to make amends with a young couple, Ojebeta and Jacob, who weave new dreams, like Chike and Akunna, out of the customary terrors of traditional life. The last pattern of action is what we may regard as the touchstone of Emecheta's art, the *modus vivendi* of her muse.

Emecheta's most progressive works, The Moonlight Bride, Naira Power and Destruction Biafra, depict bleak visions of African womanhood based on what she ostensibly considers existing negative socio-cultural situations, but finally they emerge with positive and idealistic alternatives. Despite the restrictions to female

creativity in a male-chauvinistic African community, two rural girls, Ngbeke and Ogoli, play an important pathfinding role in their leading men to kill a python in The Moonlight Bride. From the skin of the python, a most attractive bridal item is procured for the significant wedding of two ordinarily disagreeable partners - an albino, Chiyei, and a man known in the community as a never-do-well, Alatikiri. Contrary to all expectations, the marriage is a spectacular success for the fortunes of Alatikiri. This transforms not just the couple and the public perception of their specific inadequacies, but the spirit and attitude to human failings in general. The couple, especially Alatikiri, is so public-spirited that in him, what the public is searching for in generosity in distant lands they now find on their door-step. Naira Power isomorphically relates the malfeasance and anarchy of Nigerian society with polygamy. Authorial logic is worked out through the get-rich-quick and greedy propensities of Lemonu, head of a polygamous household. This dramatic change from an honest and hard-working citizen is blamed on the load of supervising the upbringing of numerous children, and several wives who are constantly jostling for his attention by means both fair and foul. In Destination Biafra, a woman, Debbie Ogedengbe, rises above all the sectional bases of the fratricidal Nigerian civil war. The most remarkable aspect of this female creation is her sense of freedom, freedom from the familiar realities of Nigeria in recent times. Debbie Ogedengbe is liberated from any kind of female dependency, imaginary or real. Psycho-cultural and historical realities are rejected in favor of daring individualistic strides toward new horizons of thought, feeling and action.

The world of The Joys of Motherhood is the familiar one of modern African history. Africa meets the west and the meeting is harsh and traumatic. War time separation, poverty, polygamy, unromantic marriages, the worries of childbirth and childrearing, the pain of the final independence of children: all these are familiar burdens which African women must endure. The heroine, Nnu Ego, endures and the final empty reward is a noisy funeral. Her husband, Nnaife, does not really fare better except that as a man, being ugly does not really deny him his superior social prestige, the pleasures of purposeless carousels, and other tempestuous irrationalities. Concealed in this finely executed novel of culture-conflict are the questions of slavery, racism and tribalism. Double Yoke continues the essential unequal treatment of men and women, but suggests directly that the root of the crisis in African societies lies in the conflict between indigenous African culture and that of the west. The structure of action and authorial bias are, therefore, the same in The Moonlight Bride, Naira Power and Destination Biafra. Generally, the evils men do in society are the same in all the novels.

The lowly position of women is also the same except in some of the younger generation such as Ngbeke and Ogoli in The Moonlight Bride and the vivacious and dynamic Debbie Ogedengbe in Destination Biafra.

Let us speak the truth for the sake of the earth goddess, as the Igbo would say when confronted with difficult positions. After going through the range of Emecheta's works, "it is difficult to deny the accomplishment of the artistry."[6] At least two of her novels, The Joys of Motherhood and Destination Biafra in intensity and craft will compare favorably with many great novels. While that is so, one must admit that the thinly veiled bitterness is distracting, indeed so distracting that other sensitive issues in human society are trivialized. There are such truncated references to racism, superstition, ethnic laziness, corruption, squandermania, despotism and malfeasance of sorts and the varied socio-cultural malaise of the modern African. Seldom are these issues independently and fully developed. Very often they are matters remembered in less passionate moments or effusions evoked to emphasize the bestiality of African men.

There are great omissions in Emecheta's vision which threaten her art with the badge of fantasy, omissions which reduce many of the works to private crusades waged for the vicarious revenge for private hurt. Is it true that the lot of women in traditional African societies is as grim, fatalistic and tragic bound as some of these novels claim? In a society controlled by strict sexual or moral codes, who were the Igbo men romping with ? If it could be said for Ibuza culture, must it apply or be distorted to apply to all other Igbo or African Communities? These questions are being raised because sociological reports and inquiries suggest that women were not being acted upon all the time and that the exaggerated deadly burden imposed by men were features more readily found in certain cultural circumstances and sometimes women were responsible for their fortunes or misfortunes. In Isichei's Igbo Worlds, we are told that women "brought much pressure to bear on many bad things that were going on in the town or village. Particularly, they were charged with the affairs of the women in general . . ."[7] In Uchendu's The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, we learn that "Igbo women support and finance polygamy because it enhances their social status and lightens domestic chores . . ."[8] M.M. Green, in Igbo Village Affairs, makes elaborate explanations about the liberties of women in Igbo society and concludes that:

> It is the women who for the most part supply the food and who cook it. And from first to last, this gives them a lever

> both individually and collectively by which they can, if need be, quietly bring about pressure to bear on the men.[9]

If one questions the considerable power of women to effect change or control their destiny, we must wonder who organized the Aba riots of 1929 for them.

When we look at the Igbo past through the eyes of Emecheta, there is this dangerous impression that there is, if any, little love and cheer in the lives of Igbo women, and rompings and carousals were the exclusive business of men. Certain underlying factors which control male-female relationships have either been avoided or glossed over. For instance, pre-marital sexual relationships were rare in Igbo society and remained almost so till the Biafran crisis. Sex belonged strictly to marriage and most people got married not because of love but because they wanted children. For this second reason, women who became pregnant before marriage sometimes had greater chances of being married than the chaste. The same pressure which compelled a woman to marry the man she did not "love" is also shared by the man. The unromantic nature of Igbo sexual relationships has not been carefully recreated because we still need to explore the psycho-cultural forces responsible for matters such as the lack of offensive interest or connivance in the "adulterous" affairs of women in certain Igbo communities.
For instance,

> It is not in theory socially approved for a married woman to take a secret lover . . . whereas premarital chastity is socially required . . . And a woman, usually an only wife, who finds that she has too much work to do, may, by arrangement with her husband, take a lover to help her with her farm work.[10]

Informed by a new psychology, the result of contact with the west, there is some weirdness and wrongness about these things. But, if every problem is treated with the bluntness their superficial appearance demands, rings a weird Igbo proverb, a dead baby will soon be buried in the mother's uterus.

In dealing with the problems in our society , the Igbo artist must learn not to use the thing we use for cleaning wax in our ears for cleaning our eyes. Contextuality is imperative if we must understand some of the questions posed by a past that was neither entirely rosy nor thorny. Was the battle between man and woman raging in all families and communities? How did the great women

in Igbo society attain their status? Why is it that there were also successful polygamous families as there were failures? Or were some such families not successful? Do we not have matriarchal communities in Igbo land? We are told, for instance, that male-female "relationship in Ohaffia seems to be one of mutual respect and accommodation of each other; it also seems to be positively harmonious."[11] As we ponder over these questions, let us not close our eyes to the happenings in some of the western countries we think are models. The phenomena of serial marriages and numerous divorces, surrogate parenting, test-tube babies, are all human responses to some of those same problems which led to some of the seemingly "weird" practices and dispositions in our culture. One must therefore be careful about easy answers based on the conditions of an imaginary utopia elsewhere.

For Emecheta the panacea for all Igbo woes arising from the battle of the sexes is love and understanding predicated on a rejection of the seamy aspects of the past. That prescription is right but eventually what counts is what individuals work out for themselves according to the peculiar demands of their private circumstances. Igbo people are as vibrant and dynamic as their culture. The public aspects of the problems which many of her novels are addressing, in tune with Igbo respectability and adaptability to shock and change, are resolving themselves without harangue and soap-boxing. Consider the population of Igbo women in the universities and public service, and the unstoppered enthusiasm with which present Igbo families encourage their daughters. Igbo men are chauvinistic and overbearing. Indeed, so are all men and most humans for that matter, who hold any kind of advantage over the other. Freedom is a product of the active rejection of inferiority and subservience. This is the lesson from colonialism, racism and capitalism.

What is my own prescription? For me, lasting peace for any woman (or man) will reside in individual free will. For this reason, I consider Destination Biafra the most successful work of Emecheta. The conduct of the heroine is a model of functional realism. The novel convinces everyone that freedom from any problematic situation does not emerge from a pool of tears. Bold and decisive action breaks fetters. If you do not like polygamy or marriage, reject it. If you do not want children, refuse pregnancy. Every individual, within the limits of law, must remove his or her arraignment from the imaginary court of what-will-society-say to the secret chambers of the self where one, without jury, plaintiff or counsel, holds the gavel. Figuratively speaking, the bloody battle which women are waging to show how evil men are is a tragic

waste of energy. There is more hurt and loss than profit in such futile exercises. The whole male-female situation in human society is a pile of mess; and as the Igbo say, if you angrily cut a pile of mess with a machete, some of the mess is bound to enter your mouth. Once again, according to Simone de Beauvoir,

> People have tirelessly sought to prove that woman is superior, inferior, or equal to man . . . Each argument at once suggests its opposite, and both are fallacious. If we are to gain understanding, we must get out of these ruts; we must discard the vague notions of superiority, inferiority, equality, which have hitherto corrupted every discussion of the subject and start afresh.[12]

Starting afresh means seizing the reins of our lives and riding boldly into the future through those private judgements upon which depend, first of all, our individuality, before our collective destiny.

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[1]Simone de Beauvoir, "Introduction to the Second Sex," New French Feminisms, Elaine Marks & Courtivron, eds., (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), p.53.

[2]Oladele Taiwo, Female Novelists of Modern Africa, (London: MacMillen, 1984), p.102.

[3]Eustace Palmer, "Buchi Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood", African Literature Today, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), p.55.

[4]Buchi Emecheta, In The Ditch, (New York: George Brazillier, 1972), p.197. (Other page references are to the same edition.)

[5] ----------, The Bride Price. (Glascow: Fontana/Collins, 1978), p.28. (Other page references are to th same text.)

[6]Palmer, op. cit., p.55.

[7]Elizabeth Isichei, Igbo Worlds, (Philadelphia Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1978), P.74.

[8]Victor Ucheindu, The Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), p.86.

[9]M.M. Green, Igbo Village Affairs, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 156.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Philip O, Nsugbe, Ohaffia: A Matrilineal Igbo People, (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 136.

[12]de Beauvoir, op. cit., pp. 53-54