

STRONG DETERMINATION FOR SELF-DISCOVERY IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S KEHINDE

T. Sindhu

PhD Research Scholar, Bharathidasan University,
Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli-17
sindhuthangavel06@gmail.com

Dr. Suresh Frederick,

Associate Professor and UG Head,
Department of English,
Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli-17
sfheber@gmail.com

Abstract

Buchi Emecheta is one of the most renowned female writers from Nigeria. Her writing expresses the conflict of native heritage and western culture in hybrid Nigerian society. She resists the traditional indigenous practices that confine women to African patriarchal structure. She portrays women in Africa under Igbo culture and tradition. At the same time, she talks about her perception of life as a strenuous African effort to ensconce her identity in a Western country and then discusses her character and how she has been entrapped into two different worlds: the native African Igbo culture and the Westernised culture. This article presents the main character, Kehinde, as distinct from an ordinary Igbo woman. The reason is her strong determination to mould her life away from the old Igbo traditional practices. Kehinde is an educated modern African woman who is independent, assertive, courageous, and liberated.

Keywords: tradition, hybrid culture, polygamy, independence, individuality.

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is a prolific writer. She has published over 20 novels, an autobiography, and children's stories. Her works focus on African women in the centre of male chauvinist society, where women are always negligible and ignored in the background. African and Igbo lands celebrate womanhood and motherhood. However, African women are always considered passive because of the hybrid culture in African society facing the horrendous upshot of colonialism. Her novels expose the subjugated condition of women oppressed by rural tradition, like the permutable world of urban Lagos or the indifferent atmosphere of London. Her works reveal the pathetic state of women and girls who have been exploited, enslaved, brutalised, and abused by men, degraded, and then entrapped into the unfairness of society. Marie Umeh says the plight of Nigerian women who are voiceless souls is epitomized by Buchi Emecheta.

The story *Kehinde* is about the Okolo family of Nigerian immigrant who lived in United Kingdom for eighteen years. They earn a living in Western countries. They now have recognised positions with high-income jobs. Albert works as a storekeeper, and Kehinde is hiring for the managerial position at a bank, which has a house and a car more than a close-knit family with her employed husband and two caring children, the name of the son Joshua and the name of the daughter Bimpe, who are second-generation immigrants.

In this novel, *Kehinde*, the protagonist, gains freedom and is freed from confining Igbo traditions. Emecheta describes how women affected or overcome by patriarchal norms with the concept of freedom. She endorses one who must take the necessary weapons because it is essential to breaking the chain of traditions that set boundaries for the freedom of women. Her most effective weapons are Western education and financial independence.

Their lives go on well until Albert's sisters, Selina and Mary, interrupt him to return to Nigeria. Indeed, Kehinde is the one who disturbs this letter and disagrees with them because she considers that their two children should live on Western soil. Kehinde is unwilling to visit Nigeria. She likes the convivial environment that brought their family together in England. On the contrary, Albert wants to go to his homeland. He hides his ecstasy and waits for this opportunity to return to his land. His children found out about his happiness because, "After eighteen years, he pined for sunshine, freedom, easy friendship, warmth. If he could get Kehinde on his side, winning the children over would be easy. He wanted to go home and show off his new lifestyle, and his material success. He would be able to build houses to be someone. Nigeria was booming, and he wanted to join the party"(Ke 6). Albert dreams of living the life of a Yoruba chief in his homeland. On the other hand, Kehinde is accustomed to her London life and has come out of her traditional Igbo heritage.

Albert returns to Lagos because he pretends to lead a happy life in London. His perception of London is a stupid country, as he earned low wages, he preferred to depend on his wife's money.

In Meantime, Albert realises Kehinde is pregnant. He justifies having another baby as a bad idea by saying that, "This is not the right time for another one. I know abortion is wrong, but we are in a strange land, where you do things contrary to your culture"(Ke 15). Rather, he talks to himself and says, "In my country, children are a necessity. They mean a good old age with plenty to eat. And with grandchildren, people respect you" (Ke 16). In this context, Kehinde is not ready to accept this idea, so she argues, "Our people believe that people are more valuable than money" (Ke 7) Albert replies that, "I know all that. But our people never lived in London, where parents have to pay a great part of their wages to nannies to look after their babies" (Ke 7).

Kehinde knows her husband's family will treat her as less important when she returns to Nigeria. She says, "I haven't a clear vision what I am supposed to be looking for there" (Ke 22). On the contrary, Albert longing for his homeland, where he can show his authoritative masculinity and proves himself as the head of the family. Once he discussed his friend Prabhu, he reveals the truth behind to go home: "But I want to go back to the way of life my father had, a life of comparative ease for men and women are women..." (Ke 35). On the other hand, Kehinde knows very well that "behind the veneer of westernization, the traditional Igbo man was alive and strong, awaiting an opportunity to reclaim his birthright" (Ke 35).

Kehinde contravenes their tradition only because of her husband's wishes, so she undergoes an abortion. Albert urges Kehinde to abort the child because he is more conscious of his wife not losing her promotion at the bank because of her pregnancy. Albert successfully executes his plan, and now Kehinde aborts her child. He arranges a grand party, bids farewell to his friends, and is ready to go happily to Nigeria. Kehinde arranges the party, but Albert acts selfishly, unprepared to appreciate her effort. He depends on his wife, so he entrusted his needs to her.

Albert instructs Kehinde before leaving London that it is her responsibility to sell their house; after that, she comes to Nigeria. He gives assurance when he calls the children and sends them to a boarding school where the top-notch students have great dignity to study there. Kehinde's life becomes incapacitated when she tries to sell her house in London. Indeed, Nigerians living in the area refuse to accept her advertisement because, in their minds, Kehinde is not with her husband; now she is a single woman, separated, and marginalised.

She is able to understand if a wife does not have a husband; it meant that she is considered a half-person. Kehinde is settled in England and follows her traditional Nigerian practices as a paradigm of existence. Her luxurious life is slowly disappearing at the moment, and now her life is so miserable. Kehinde never gets any calls from her husband for two years, but he told her to extend her stay in London. She feels like a fish out of water, especially since her favourite London place is strange. She badly missed her husband, children, and Nigerian community friends.

Albert's attitude could worry Kehinde, and her "chi" is none other than the voice of her twin Taiwo insisting to her, "Why don't you go to Nigeria and find out what is happening, before it's too late? Have you forgotten that in Nigeria it's considered manly for men to be unfaithful? Even if he didn't want women they would come to him" (Ke 46). Kehinde still believes that her husband never deceived her. At the same time, she is astonished that, "Just suppose after all this, Albert was not like girlfriend or been, unfaithfully?" (Ke 47). Again, her chi reiterates that she should be careful about her life. Still, she convinces herself that "Albert was not like that, she tells herself. She knew him through and through. He was different, he had principles, and the

major one of these was to keep his family happy. No, Albert was not the type to break apart his family, or to make her unhappy” (Ke 47). Her intimate friend Moriammo often insists Kehinde, “I tell you say, the girls there dey craze for any man were just returned from England!” (Ke 51).

Kehinde’s friend Moriammo tells her ears, “Nigeria no man’s country Dem get plenty, plenty women way dey chase dem” (Ke 86). Kehinde decides to resign from her job at the bank and tells her husband about her decision. Albert is disgusted and tries to persuade her that her decision is incorrect because she is leaving before the unsold house. Kehinde slowly realises the transformation of her husband. She senses that her husband is slowly dropping her hand. She is determined to go to Nigeria.

Kehinde returns to Lagos, the country where she underwent the most horrendous and shell-shocking experience. When she understands that her husband has claimed his birthright, polygamy, Kehinde learns that he married another woman named Rike, a highly educated bride who works in a university, has fathered a son who is twelve months old, and is expecting the birth of his second child. Kehinde discovers Albert's new confidence and gets an answer for Albert's indifferent attitude.

Kehinde understands that henceforth she would be known as the senior wife of a successful Nigerian man. At Lagos, she finds Albert deliberately keeping his distance from her. She recognizes that he does not care about the gap between them. She feels cheated and undervalued. Kehinde waits for an opportunity to ask her husband about the role of a typical African male part; he tells that, “I know you are angry. But look back, Kehinde. My father had two wives, yours had three, so what sin did I commit that is so abominable?” (Ke 86). Kehinde makes sense that she is not supposed to speak out against a tradition, but her chi words come to her mind that “manly for men to be unfaithful”.

According to Kehinde, polygamy is a societal evil. For Kehinde, it is not easy to accept. Indeed, she has spent so many years in England, so her mind is westernised. Nigerian traditions appear absurd, and she does not tolerate her husband’s name. She calls her husband as “our husband or Joshua’s father” (Ke 71). Kehinde understands that this place is not suitable for her. Her children Joshua and Bimple adopted and accepted their life in Nigeria, which gives Kehinde a little bit of relief. At the same time, the newcomers to their families make Kehinde a little distressed. Meanwhile, Kehinde decides to return to London as “the circle has closed in her absence, and she did not have the strength to fight her way back in” (Ke 91).

Buchi Emecheta’s novel *Kehinde* and other novels tradition and custom not only enslaves women but also weakens them. Women in the western world are marching forward but for women living in Africa, tradition holds them back. One can see that through this novel, the traditional practices are made easier in the case of Rike, another wife of Albert, who is ready to

serve men. Emecheta creates these types of characters to represent that they have no objection and are prepared to obey the traditional practices and mores. At the same time, they are destructive to their personal development. These types of women are dangerous because not only that they are destructive to their personal growth. Such women are the enemy of womanhood, and acquiesce in male servitude.

When Kehinde reaches Nigeria, her life is reversed, as she is less valued and humiliated. Kehinde tries to speak about her feelings with her husband, but he is not ready to lend his ears to Kehinde. Kehinde does not accept the senior wife position in Nigerian society. Kehinde tells everything to Moriammo, who arranges the air tickets. Kehinde is not worried about her traditional practice of polygamy and accepts her conviction that she deserved it for her action.

Kehinde's behaviour shows that being an admirable wife is better than being a respectable woman. When she reaches England, her "chi" Taiwo spirit says, "Home, sweet home!" and then advises Kehinde that "We make our own choices, we go along... This is yours. There's nothing to be ashamed of in that" (Ke 108). Kehinde holds a remarkable quality that is beneficial for her lifestyle.

Emecheta knows that learning education helps women's progress, self-fulfilment, and self-achievement. Kehinde decides, "Raising children is no longer enough. The saving grace for us women is the big "E" of education" (Ke 95).

Generally, western countries have found the drawbacks like "racism, unemployment and dignity robbed" (Ke 115). However, people would still prefer to live a luxurious life there rather than in their homeland. Even the "jobs for own land uncertificated were becoming few and far between in Nigeria" (Ke 115). Kehinde, after reaching London, obtains her degree in sociology. Also, she gets a decent job in the Department of social services and gets the little penny paid by her tenants. She wants to save every penny for her children to bring back and believes that it will be easier for them here than we lived here because they were born here.

A teenage Joshua moves to his London home and discovers his mother Kehinde to be a more confident and rebellious thinker. His expectation of her was that of an ideal Ibuza village woman. He cannot understand why his mother allows a relationship with their tenant, Michael Gibson. When he inquires about him, Kehinde wonders: "This is my house, and I want him out", Kehinde immediately rectifies him and tells him that It's not like that this house is yours one day. Joshua is not supposed to accept his westernised mother, who had left her husband. When Joshua disapproves of his mother's attitude, Kehinde replied that taking her rights will not diminish her motherhood and femininity, if anything it makes her more human.

The protagonist Kehinde wants her worth as a woman to be recognized. She points out womanhood hinges on her son. She propounds to her twin sister Taiwo, "Now we are one" (Ke

141). Kehinde dares to resist the social conventions practised with the help of her chi. Kehinde navigates her life against cultural practices and taboos and finds her unique as a woman. She took a degree, and got a job at the Department of Social Services and enjoyed meeting people and leading her own life happily. Kehinde desires that in the future, there will be improvements for the better in her country.

Conclusion

Emecheta thinks that Kehinde is no longer just an ordinary black woman, she represents the black woman survivor. Her foremothers lived in horrible situations. Instead, she likes to live boldly and confidently. Emecheta discusses the progress of Nigerian women in reaching the top globally by reaching their heights and asserting a sense of individual identity and their place in society. Her character, Kehinde, breaks the traditional female role and strives for social equality through entrepreneurship. Through her strong and determined efforts, Emecheta has discovered herself.

References

- Amuta, Chidi. *The Theory of African Literature*. Zed Books Ltd, 1989.
- Ashcroft, Bill. *Postcolonial Transformation*. Routledge, 2001.
- Berrian, Brenda F. "Her Ancestor's Voice: The Ibieje Transcendence of Duality in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*". *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*. Ed. Marie Umeh, Africa World Press, 1996.
- Brown, Lloyd, W. *Women Writers in Black Africa*. London: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Cobham, Rhonda, *Research in African Literatures*. Vol.19/No.2/Summer, 1988.
- Emecheta, Buchi. *Kehinde*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1994.
- Essence* – Interview with Buchi Emecheta by writer Elsie B. Washington.
- Frederick, Suresh. *Contemporary Contemplations on New Literatures*. Authorspress, 2020.
- Frederick, Suresh, J.X.Herbert and Gayathri, K.R. "Behavioural Psychology of African Women: A Study of The Psychological Reactions of the African Women in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions*". *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 2022, Vol. 6, No. 9.

Gyekye, Kwame. *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Hawley, John C. “Coming to Terms: Buchi Emecheta’s Kehinde and the Birth of a ‘Nation’.”

Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta. Ed. Marie Umeh. Trenton: Africa World, 1996. 333-48.

Jahn, Janhenz. *Who’s Who in African Literature*. Eerdman, 1972.

Katrak, H.Ketu. *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. Rutgers UP, 2006.

Larson, Charles. R. *Emergence of African Fiction*. London: Indiana University Press, 1972.

Little, Kenneth. *The Sociology of Urban Women’s Image in African Literature*. Macmillan, 1980. Oladele Taiwo, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa*. MacMillen, 1984.

Ohaeto, Ezenwa. “Replacing Myth with Myth: The Feminist Streak in Buchi Emecheta’s *Double Yoke*”. *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, edited by Marie Umeh. Africa World Press, 1996.

Opoku, Kofi Asara. *West African Traditional Religion*. FEP International, 1978. Popkin, Michael, ed. *Modern Black Writers*. Ungar, 1978.

Sindhu, T and Suresh Frederick. “Representation of The Sorrow of Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*”. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 2021.

Umeh, Marie. “Procreation Not Recreation: Decoding Maman in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*”. *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*. edited by Marie Umeh, Africa World Press, 1996.