



Sexual Difference, Gender Inequality And Gender Oppression In Buchi Emecheta's Fiction— An Overview

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Abstract

The image of women in the novels of Buchi Emecheta, whose fictional modes bring into sharp focus the African woman's struggle to act out her destiny in a tradition-bound society dominated by patriarchal attitudes. A study of this kind appeared to be in the context of the changing perceptions about women's roles and place in modern society. While the emphasis in the study is, therefore, naturally on how the images of women come across in the novels of Buchi Emecheta, there is no attempt to project an overtly feminist angle or present a specifically subversive feminist argument.

Keywords: Gender/sex, Gender Inequality, Gender Oppression, Sexual Difference, Western Feminist Consciousness, Cultural Studies.

Introduction

In this article, it has been a rewarding experience, in spite of the difficulties encountered in securing the necessary sources, and critical commentaries are published and deeply indebted. Africa has had a long and glorious tradition of literature even before the advent of the "lettered" Europeans on the continent. As in the other cultures and in other countries, literature in West Africa was basically oral and folk-oriented, the tradition stretches back into time immemorial, and its impact is evident in its modern literature. The modern writer finds it easier to communicate through modes he/she is familiar with, and often the subject of his/her creative writing is a proud and nostalgic recall of his/her racial past. One may even define the African literature of modern times as a crystallization, a codification of the non-lexical literary tradition of Africa. It is generally in the form of songs, fables, and parables and is transmitted by word of mouth and through well-established traditions, customs, practices, and habits. Change is the law of life, but tradition, embodied in and communicated through literature, not only helps to prevent a violent erosion of values in life but also aids the process of a slow but steady evolution of a society and its culture.

Western feminism and the issue of gender

Focusing on gender as a basis of women's sexual oppression, feminist scholarship attempts to establish equal rights for women. It attempts to give a voice to women and expose the extent to which women are oppressed and marginalized within a patriarchal society. According to Guerin (2005), feminism focuses on the subjugation and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, "a culture organized in favor of men". Simon de Beauvoir asserts that "the female is regarded as the other", an object who is defined and theorized by the male-dominated society. In this regard, gender identity is constructed by culture, and they are not an 'eternal norm'. In this regard, they consider women's experience and their gender identity in a patriarchal society. "Sexual Difference", "Gender Inequality", and "Gender Oppression" are the fundamental concepts discussed in Western Feminist discourse.

Feminism is a collection of movements that struggle for women's rights. Focusing on gender as a basis of women's sexual oppression, feminist scholarship attempts to establish equal rights for women politically, economically, socially, and personally. The Joys of Motherhood highlights Buchi Emecheta's critical view toward colonialism and racism affecting Third World women's lives. Besides this, Emecheta goes further to display African women's invisibility and marginalization, which were out of sight for a long time, in terms of some aspects of Western feminist discourse. Her creative discourse, in this regard, casts further light upon the issue of gender oppression in African feminist studies. Hence, this article attempts to examine the way in which Emecheta furthers Western feminist ideology. Since Nigeria was colonized by the English Empire, colonialism, racism, and their effects on black people were the subjects of many Nigerian writings. Emecheta is known as a black Nigerian female writer who speaks for Nigerian women's domination and marginalization within the Igbo society. She notices how Igbo women are treated in the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods- what is dismissed and disregarded for years. So, along with criticizing colonialism and racism, she highlights the issue of gender as a basis for sexual rights.

Like most of her works, *The Joys of Motherhood*, her masterpiece, documents the traces of gender oppression, sexual difference, and gender inequality. That's why her works are said to be involved in the trace of Western feminism. However, Emecheta avoids being called a Western feminist. In this case, Nadaswaran Shaluni (2012) mentions that: "we find Buchi Emecheta and Marima Ba being defensive and indignant whenever they are referred to as feminist. In fact, Buchi Emecheta states that her type of feminism is an African type of feminism called womanism. Alice Walker, a founder of womanism, believes that due to "their double identity, black women are the victims of both sexism (sexual discrimination) and racism (racial discrimination)" (Kohzadi et al., 2011).

Sexual politics in black feminism

Black feminism is the acknowledgement that women of color have been oppressed by the intersection of sexual and racial forces. Accordingly, it affiliates with the postcolonial feminist movement, regarding the common context of struggle against racism. To examine if Buchi Emecheta invokes some

concepts of Western feminism in *The Joys of Motherhood*, it is necessary to consider the sexual politics in this movement as well. According to Evelyn Hammonds, "Black women's sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a 'void' or space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women's bodies are already colonized" (qtd. in Collins 2000). Asserting women's silence where black women's bodies are sexually oppressed, a black feminist scholar notes that "Black women's sexuality is either ignored or included primarily in relation to African-American men's issues".

Regarding this context, women's sexual oppression in the native patriarchy should be silenced. Black women's sexual harassment can be discussed in the Black Feminist discourse, only if it is related to white men. For, in this case, it can be discussed in terms of Race. Collins, in her discussion, mentions the story of Anita Hill's sexual harassment by her employer, Thomas, a black man. Ignoring the racial difference, white American women, out of global sisterhood around the idea of sexual oppression, recognize this sexual harassment as a "landmark event".

In contrast, US black men and women suggest that even if Thomas was a sexual harasser, Hill should be silent (ibid). Lisa Jones, in this context, notes that Hill's story sent, implicitly, this message: "speaking out doesn't pay. A harassed woman is still a double victim, and a vocal, critical black woman is still a traitor to the race" (qtd in Collins 2000). By description, black women are not permitted to speak and discuss some topics, for instance sexuality, if they are "unmediated by the question of racism" (Giddings; qtd in Collins).

Accordingly, as Collins points out, demystifying black women's sexual oppression in "white racist construction" is acceptable while disclosing sexual oppression that contributes to the black men should be dismissed. In fact, in terms of context, "it violates norms of radical solidarity that counsel Black women always to put our own needs second". Regarding these racial boundaries, Collins, furthermore, suggests that even some topics are more acceptable than others. Black women's rape, for instance, by white men during the slavery period can be noticed and discussed, while black women's rape by Black men cannot. Accordingly, regarding the "issue of sexuality", black women should be silent. Merely, those elements of their sexuality can be examined that have an intersection with racial issues. Collins, in this context, notes that "[t]he cost is that other elements remain off limits. Rape, incest, misogyny in Black cultural practices, and other painful topics that might implicate Black men remain taboo" (ibid).

Regarding the U.S. culture that defined black women as immoral, he indicates that: [i]n situations where regulating Black women's bodies benefited systems of race, class, and gender alike, protecting the safe spaces for Black women's self-definitions often required public silences about seemingly provocative topics. In a climate where one's sexuality is on public display, holding fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door becomes paramount.

Accordingly, in this context, where "internal self-censorship"(ibid), in Collins's sense, is regarded as protection, "silence made sense" (ibid). Womanism developed in a condition where black scholars and activists believed that Western Feminism didn't completely consider black women's problems. Rather, it fought for white, heterosexual middle-class women's rights and social equality. Feminism, Ama Ata Aidoo, an African critic and novelist, indicates that "Feminism, you know how we feel about embarrassing Western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African women" (qtd in Blackmon 2008). Suffering from historical racial oppression, black men and women know themselves as equal partners in struggles against racial oppression.

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Western feminist consciousness in emecheta's the joys of motherhood

Being regarded as a black feminist and postcolonial feminist novel which criticizes the intersection of oppressive forces – race, gender, and class- and highlights their effects on the disempowered African women's lives, *The Joys of Motherhood*, nevertheless, accommodates some aspects of Western feminism to highlight women's gender oppression, gender inequality, and sexual difference within the Igbo patriarchal society. It points out the way in which women are silenced and oppressed by native patriarchy, and this oppression is not mediated by race. However, "concentrating on gender oppression alone would never make sense for [women of color and Third World women] who always experienced sexual and racial oppression as linked and compounded"(Lewis & Mills 2003). Polygamy, motherhood, marriage, women's reproductive rights, educational rights, and others, as sources of gender oppression, are among the key concepts discussed in this discourse.

Polygamy: a site of gender oppression

Highlighting the issue of polygamy in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta, indeed, casts further light upon the issue of sexuality and women's sexual oppression in African feminism. According to Nfah-Abbenyi (1997), Western feminist discourse limited its analysis of gender inequality to women's biology and/ or their sexuality and how it has been sanctioned either by patriarchy or by the phallus. Women's sexuality is, on the one hand, controlled by an unbalanced sexual division of labor that manipulates

women's procreative; on the other hand, women's body is presented as pleasure-based entities whose drives have either been sanctioned or repressed. We are exposed to the fact that females' sexual pleasures are neglected within the polygamous system.

Agbadi disregarded his wives for years. They just receive one yam a day. He sleeps with his mistress while his wives wish to hear a word from him (Emecheta 1979). This statement highlights the extent to which women are sexually oppressed and disregarded within the Igbo patriarchal discourse. She is dismissed after a while, like a commodity. In this regard, following some aspects of Western feminist ideology discussing women's sexual oppression and harassment, Emecheta, in her novel, is going to question the male authority and the polygamous system of oppression as well. She attempts to give a voice to the disenfranchised silent African women, to give them a "room of their own", and to cast light upon women's invisibility and oppression within the African patriarchy, something which should be dismissed and silenced about in black feminist realm of study- because gender oppression is permitted to be study, merely, in relation to race and/or class.

Education: a room of their own

As discussed, Western feminism questions the phallocentric thought that limits women to domestic labor. Liberal feminism, in this context, examines how women are prevented from having the opportunity to play their role in society and to achieve success. In this regard, Virginia Woolf, referring to Shakespeare's sister as one who is as gifted as Shakespeare himself, notes that Shakespeare's sister is not a writer because she is a woman and thus her gender doesn't permit her to have "a room of her own". Because she is female, she is prevented from having the educational opportunity. Following Western feminists who demand women's educational rights, Emecheta offers her critique of the African patriarchy, which provides educational opportunity merely for boys. Emecheta, in this regard, offers her critical view through her character Adaku, who is the representation of a liberal woman. Knowing education as a way to women's freedom, she wants her daughters to be educated. By description, Emecheta, indeed, encourages African women to be educated to have "a room of their own".

Conclusion

Feminist consciousness permeates the works of ten major female novelists from black America. They are Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Mabel Segium from Nigeria, Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland from Ghana, Mariama Ba from Senegal, Rebecka Njau and Grace Got from Kenya, and Bassie Head and Nadine Gordimer from South Africa. The works of these authors are centered upon the problems, the pains, and the hopes peculiar to African women. Their works are intimately concerned with the predicament of their heroines, who represent African womanhood under the stress of social change. They project the image of a truly heroic female, rebelling against the established traditions. The image that emerges from these writings differs from the one created by the male writers. These writers place their values in conflict with those of men and their milieu. The heroines are rebels against the established traditions. Though they conform enough to the role reserved for an African woman in seeking marriage

and fulfillment for their Womanhood in motherhood, along with the common run of womenfolk in their communities, they are rebels too in choosing their partners in life and asserting their individuality in their confrontation with society and their husbands. A new African woman with a night of her own has thus come into being, heralding the dawn of female emancipation from the constricting role which has been reserved for her by tradition. Colonialism brought about many changes for Nigeria. In this condition, Igbo women are faced with double oppression. Their oppression and marginalization, however, within their own patriarchal society, were dismissed and silenced for many years, for gender oppression was permitted to be studied merely in relation to race. In this regard, following some aspects of Western feminist ideology discussing women's gender oppression and inequality, Emecheta, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, is going to question the male authority in a patriarchal society in precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. She attempts to give a voice to the disenfranchised, silent African women, to give them a "room of their own", and to cast further light upon women's invisibility and oppression within the African patriarchy.

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