

THE WOUNDED PSYCHE IN EMECHETA'S *IN THE DITCH*

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Abstract

*The issues of the predicament of women across the world have been a major focus of contemporary study. It is true that women are always at the receiving end. Naturally, women writers of all ages have a natural preference for writing about women characters. Their writings mostly deal with the issue of woman's wounded psyche. In such context, Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta, widely recognized as a leading female voice in contemporary African literature has attracted international attention. Woman's wounded psyche constitutes a major part of Buchi Emecheta's fictional work. Most of her novels move around women characters. Along with many other women novelists, Emecheta has established an important female presence in the modern African literature. Her novels highlight the traditional systems in which women have no place than to keep the house and rear the children by pleasure to men. The present paper investigates the wounded psyche of a woman in Buchi Emecheta's *In the Ditch*.*

Key Terms:

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Buchi Emecheta is one of Africa's the highly respected writers in present times. She was born in Lagos, Nigeria, on 21 July, 1944, in the home of her parents Jermey Nwabudike Emecheta and Alice Ogbane Ojebeta Emecheta. In 1960, at the age of sixteen, she was married to Sylvester Onwordi, to whom she had been engaged since she was eleven. After their marriage, Sylvester and Buchi moved to London. Over the course of her six year marriage, Emecheta gave birth to five children.

Buchi Emecheta's works deal with the wounded psyche of the African woman. By 'Psyche' Jung means: "Not only what we generally call 'soul' but the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as unconscious, hence something broader and more comprehensive than the soul" (Jung 1942: 5). The main characters of Emecheta's novels show what it means to be a woman and a mother in Nigerian society. Emecheta looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children can sometimes be the only way by which to define femininity and womanhood. Commenting on Emecheta's contribution Lloyd Brown writes "Of all women writers in contemporary African literature, Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct, feminist protest. Only Bessie Head of South Africa compares with Emecheta in a certain intensity and directness when describing sexual inequality and female dependency. In Emecheta, we detect an increasing emphasis of the woman's sense of self..." (Brown 1981: 34)

Buchi Emecheta's first novel, *In the Ditch* was published in 1972. Her first two novels *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen* (reprinted as *Adah's Story*) are described by Emecheta as documentary novels which fall into the category of autobiography. *In the Ditch* begins where *Second Class Citizen* leaves off. The novel explores Adah's struggle for the life along with her children on benevolence of the public welfare in London slums. Her life in the slum house was so miserable where she used to face rats and cockroaches day and night. But Adah was black, separated from her husband, facing such unfortunate predicament. Her house owner was Nigerian but having no touch of humanity, would dream of taking the people like Adah into his house in the slums. "Her landlord, a Nigerian like herself, being aware of Adah's predicament, was, of course, taking the best advantage of the situation. The rent he charged was double what was normally asked for rooms in such houses. "He now wanted her to leave because she had had the effrontery to ask him to do something about the rats, the cockroaches and the filth"(8).

There were lots of things with which the landlord could make her life miserable. "He would thunder at her kids for any of the slightest childish noises"(8). When he would switch off the electricity, she would keep candle burning all night, being afraid of any accident could

happen in the darkness. He would wake up early in the morning and by using African juju, would frighten Adah. However, she was "more afraid of the rat than the juju landlord" (9).

In Nigeria, such a scene of juju in the middle of night means death for someone. But such juju trick would not work on her, because she would consider, "But I am tough and free, she thought, free, she repeated to herself" (9). In England she was free to keep her job, her kids and do her studies. Thus her views about herself show the strong spirit to face obstacles in courageous manner.

When Adah comes to know from her neighbours Mrs. Delvin and Mrs. Marshall, that the manager of housing council visited there to offer her a council flat, she became incoherent. To get a flat at Pussy Cat Mansions was a matter of excitement to her; as "Adah did not realize that her eyes were watering" (13). After a lot of efforts "It had taken Adah nine months of court-going, letter-writing and tribunal- visiting", she had received an opportunity of secure place (17). When she reached at Pussy Cat Mansions, along with her children, "There were three important things she knew she had acquired that night, her independence, her freedom, and peace of mind" (19).

The atmosphere at Pussy Cat Mansions was not adequate to Adah and her children as "There were nearly one hundred and forty flats in the Mansions" (20). The situation of those flats was so unhygienic that, "They were always smelly with thick lavatorial stink. Most of the rubbish chutes along the steps and balconies were always overflowing and always open, their contents adding to the stink"(21). While adjusting with her wounded psyche, the problems of Adah were not descending. She had many problems regarding her study, job and caring her kids. She had also fear of her children in the Mansions set-up, "In her old place her fear was that the landlord might harm them. At the Mansions, it was different fear: offending the neighbours" (21).

Predicament in the life of such lonely coloured woman didn't leave her at any moment. After a few days when Adah was getting coped with various odds from the Mansions, Mr. Small, an inhabitant of the Mansions for thirty years and having loud voice, threatened Adah about the disturbance of her children to his three weeks old baby. Instead quarreling with the people, she thought to develop friendship with them, "But how did one become friends with someone who belived himself to be superior, richer and made of better clay? Still, she was determined to try. One of the methods she had found very helpful in securing friendship in England was to pretend to be stupid. You see, if you were black and stupid, you were conforming to what society expected to you. She was determined to try it with the Smalls"(23). Despite the efforts of friendship, a helpless African woman had to face the cynical remarks. Adah's wounded psyche was aware about her several problems from which she cannot escape. Adah's condition was different than other separated mums as "At the Mansions, women with kids and no husbands did not go out to work. It was just not done. If you were separated, you lived on the dole. "I am going to be different," Adah said to herself in consolation, little realising that she more than anybody else would need people to talk to and be friendly with. For she was human, and a lonely woman" (25).

While taking care of the children's feeding and clothing, Adah confronted Carol, a social worker, who wants to verify the complaints about her noisy kids. Though Adah had a hot discussion with Carol, she accepts her view to care the children and extends gratitude to the lady for her timely help. However, by ignoring her self-respect, "Adah would have to swallow her pride as a woman, her dignity as a mother, and let Carol help her. She did not like to accept the help, but she had no choice" (31). But very much worried about misconceptions of baby sitters and the complaints of schoolmistress, she left her job. "Her socialization was complete, She, an African woman with five children, and no husband, no job, and no future, was just like most of her neighbours – shiftless, rootless, with no rightful claim to anything. Just cut off ... none of them knew the beginning of their existence, the reason for their hand-to-mouth existence, or the result or future of that existence. All would stay in the ditch until somebody pulled them out or they sank under"(33-34). Thus Adah lost her middle class identity and became classless. Finally, with the help of Whoopey, she joined the ditch-dwellers' association.

The intimacy with female ditch-dwellers becomes significant in her struggle against insecurity and for self-definition. The way she lives in the group of ditch shows that she does not oppose herself to all others. Her dependence on the dole creates a sense of failure; hence she concentrates herself on motherhood. Being a traditional African mother, she is not able to understand the essentials of socio-economic Western life. Adah's stormy struggle was only for the sake of her children. She had deep interest in creative writing, hence she thinks:

"I may still become a writer, a writer of best-selling book, I may become a qualified social scientist who may one day be an adviser like Carol. Meanwhile, I must live, and I must look after the kids that God gave me alive. God made a little mistake there though. He should have allowed each child that arrived a sack of money, instead of the sack of useless after-birth" (36).

Adah's friend, Whoopey helps her in the circle of desperate women from the ditch. Whoopey would tell her how to behave at social workers' visiting days and how to place complaints regarding housing. In fact, Whoopey is perhaps most significant character in *In the Ditch*, who helps Adah to rise above her awkward condition. Adah trains herself to get rid of the timidity through discussion with the women at Carol's office. In concerned with Carol, in her book *Writing Across Cultures: Gender Politics and Difference in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta*, Omar Sougou says:

Even though Carol, as the embodiment of the welfare state in the text, helps bring women together, she serves as a negative example of the system. She assists in the same way as she subdues the Mansions women, who, like Adah, accuse her of using them for her own purpose. Carol is presented as a dominant person preying on the dominated. Adah feels the effect of this more intensity than the others because of her own situation as a black woman with five children (Sougou 2002: 34-35).

For the sake the survival of her children, Adah accepts part time cleaner's job in the factory, and she falls sick. Very much worried about the life of children, she thinks:

Suppose I should die, what will become of my children? ... Please God, I pray. You can't kill me now. My little girl wants to be children's doctor, the boy a space scientist, my other daughter simply wants to be mum, with loads and loads of children, while the

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second boy wants to be policeman, a gambler and doctor all at once; the baby is too young to want to be anything. Well, all I want to give them is a good home back ground with warmth to cushion them through life (82).

After getting recovered from several days' illness, Adah spends a few happy moments with her children by visiting the church on Christmas Day. She listens with pleasure to Babu's version of the Christmas carol. Regarding Adah's motherhood, Neerja Chand justifies "The maternal love is balanced with playful humour and affection. There is no element of sentimentality in it" (Chand 2005: 87).

In the course of narrative growth, "The Ditch- dwellers Revolt" becomes a decisive section of the novel. It has much impact on Adah's development as a self-reliant character. Finally "...she moved out of the Mansions away from the ditch, to face the world alone, without the cushioning comfort of Mrs. Cox, without the master-minding of Carol. It was time she became an individual"(121).

Thus the novel ends with Adah's lonely struggle to find her own way. It is a tale of wounded psyche which observes women's capacity to survive. The novel shows women's ability to resist, and support each other. The male characters are invisible and silenced on the margins of women's space.

Emecheta's fiction focuses on the wounded psyche of African women who struggle against patriarchal family structures, unfair gender stereotypes, and contradictory social values in contemporary Africa. A study of modern African writings reveals that all major women writers especially Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo present in their novels the problems of women. They have depicted an image of woman who is suppressed and neglected by society. While these women writers were emphasizing on the importance of human values and humanistic philosophy, Emecheta, one of the foremost Nigerian novelists has made an outstanding contribution to literature by discussing in her fiction the issues of gender, class and race. Her novels highlight the issue of feminist consciousness. In the phase of post- colonialism, African literature has received a great critical recognition by the readers, scholars and critics alike.

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