

CHAPTER II

EVOLUTION OF THE ARTIST

African Writing in English is very much new to the genre of African Literature. People have taken to write only after colonialism. But, very few women writers are mentioned in this genre. Powerful male writers are dominating the scene. But, it doesn't mean that powerful women writers are not available. Some of them to be mentioned are Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta etc. They are highly appreciated for pioneering an authentic female perspective to the African Literature. They, through their writings, have presented the plight and position of women in the traditional African society with its entire true color. Also, they present the changes that take place upon the lives of the African women with the coming of colonialism. Their writings can be regarded as the writing back to the male dominated patriarchal societies, especially the biased male re-presentations of women. These writers have tried to present women's struggle to survive, while dealing with all the norms and conditions of a male dominated society.

It is not that only women writers are writing for women's plight and position. Some male writers like Sembena Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer etc. are also trying to present the true history of the female sex, or to say that the stories behind the curtains which have been prevailing in the society. African past, the reign of the Portuguese, the coming of the colonialism, the rise of modernity, the impact of post colonialism etc. all of them have more or less contributed upon the lives of the African inhabitants. That can be witnessed through the writings of the prominent African writers. As literature mirrors the changes that the society goes through, some prominent and upcoming African writers have taken it upon them to present the actual plight and conditions of the relegated classes and individuals.

Pre-dominant patriarchy is the Main reason which causes people to suffer from the other social ills like the stereotyped other, social inequality, male dominance, gender discrimination, marginalization, slavery etc. All of these mainly cause women to suffer. Though the world has come to the modern stage, these social ills are still lurking. It is not that 'women' of all countries



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around the whole world are undergoing the same pain. Some women have broken through all these social barriers, and many of them are trying through their writings to encourage other women to realize their deserving rights and freedom; and to bring others too from that 'ditch' of society.

Writer like Buchi Emecheta is apt enough to mention in this regard. She is regarded as one of the most important female authors of postcolonial Africa. Emecheta is well known for her writings especially on gender discrimination, female subjugation and the conflicts of the cultural and traditional values both in the colonial and postcolonial settings. Some of her remarkable novels are "*In the Ditch*" (1972), "*Second-Class Citizen*" (1974), "*The Bride Price*" (1976), "*The Slave Girl*" (1977), and "*The Joys of Motherhood*" (1979). Through these best-works of hers, she has presented the male dominated society of Africa, where injustice is done to women in the name of customs and rituals. Through her works, Emecheta presents the plight and position of women in both traditional and modern Africa, where a woman has nothing else to do but to keep her husband happy, bear children for him, rear the children and die after providing service all throughout her life. What Emecheta points out is that if women aspire to fight against gender discrimination, they need to be enlightened with education while having self-confidence and a courageous and determined mind.

She was born to an Igbo parents in Lagos, Nigeria, in the year 1944. Both her mother Alice Okwuekwuhe Emecheta and her father Jeremy Nwabudinke Emecheta were railway workers in 1940s when the Portuguese invaded Africa and brought the opportunities of odd jobs with them. They worked as molders on the railways. Due to the prevailing gender discrimination of her time, she was devoid of school education while her brother was sent to school. But, she had such a craze for acquiring education that she was able to persuade her parents to consider the benefits of education as much important for a female as it is regarded to be important for a male. Because of such determination, she was sent to an old all-girls' Missionary School. There she was taught English and a number of her native languages. She wanted to be a writer since her early childhood. She was influenced by her grandmother, who told stories to the children at night, after dinner. She was somehow inspired by those stories to become a writer. Her grandmother's storytelling quality inspired her so much that she herself stated in her autobiography "*Head Above Water*" (1986) that she wanted to become like her, "All I ever wanted was to tell stories from my home, just like my big mother, Nwakwaluzo, used to tell her

stories in her own compound” and wanted to become “a writer, a storyteller, like our mother, Ogbueyin and her friends at home in Ibuza.” (pp. 22)

Her father died when she was only nine years old. Shortly after that she lost her mother too. She was then sent to her ‘Big Mother’, i.e. her grandmother, where she was raised by an extended family. Just one year after the demise of her father, she received a full scholarship to Methodist Girls’ School where she remained and continued her education until she was sixteen years old. She was engaged with Silvester Onwordi when she was only eleven years old; and eventually they married as soon as her scholarship education was over. In the same year of her marriage, she gave birth to her first child, a girl, at the age of seventeen. In the year 1961, she gave birth to her first son. She left for London with her husband in 1962 and ten months later, she gave birth to a second son. She gave birth to her second daughter in the year of 1964 and by the time she was twenty two, she was the mother of five children.

After the marriage, Onwordi immediately moved to London to attain university education. Though there was no room in London for the second-class citizens like the people of the Third World countries, especially the women-folk; Emecheta joined him in 1962. She had always dreamt and aspired to visit the place. She not only went there to support her husband economically but also, with all the household work and everything. While managing her family from every angle and managing her job at the same time, she also got herself admitted to a Bachelor course under the University of London. There she worked as a library officer at the British Museum. Though she gave birth to five children in six years, yet her marriage life was not fully a happy one. It was sometimes full of happiness and sometimes very violent and bitter. And the despair of her marriage life can be seen in many of her autobiographical works. To remain happy and in good mood, she started to write in her free times. In her autobiography, “*Head Above Water*”, Emecheta stated how she managed her passion for writing, “So I worked out a plan. While my family slept I wrote the ideas, and when they were awake I typed them out. I have to write because of them (her children).” (pp. 60) But, her husband never favored her in that regard. While abusing her, he also used to undermine her writing aspirations. But, she somehow managed to publish a number of her diary entries in *The New Statesman*. Those publications later served her as part of her first novel, “*In the Ditch*”. But, her husband was so much doubtful of her writing that eventually he burned her first manuscript without even considering her hard work. But, Emecheta did not simply sat

back tolerating every injustice and subjugation done against her. She left her husband at the age of twenty two. After that she started to work to have an earning to support her five children alone, and meanwhile she earned a B.Sc degree in Sociology under the University of London in the year 1972.

She began to write about her own experiences and in 1972, her first book “*In the Ditch*” got published. This book revolves round the struggles of the main character named Adah, who was forced to live in a housing estate while working as a librarian to support her five children. It is a novel where the protagonist tries to find her existence after she walks out of her marriage because she was discriminated by her husband whom she loved so much. This novel is a quest for identity for the protagonist, Adah. Through the experiences of Adah, Emecheta presents her real-life bitter experiences. Adah, after walking out of her marriage, faced a complex world while burdened with the rearing and bearing of her five children. Just after walking out of marriage, Adah had neither a job nor a husband to share her burden with. She used to live in a housing complex named Pussy Cat Mansion with other mothers and their offspring, in London. She tried her best to get out of that hardship, but every now and then she was reminded by her landlord, friends and enemies that she was black and hence she was a second class citizen. This reminder made her realize her triple hardship of being a single parent, female and black. But she remained unaffected. She found life as a single parent tough in London and it was tough to come out of that ditch she was put in by the situations. Yet she kept on fighting. Her landlord tried to frighten her with ‘juju’ magic. But the writer has put a different view in this regard: “Whatever happened, they were all originally from the same country, the same colour, both caught in the entangled web of an industrial society. He wanted to make money from his house to pay for his studies; Adah wanted the proper value for the rent she paid. In their own country, the situation would never have occurred in the first place. Ibo people seldom separate from their husbands after the birth of five children. But in England anything could be tried, and even done. It's a free country.” (pp.27) Adah is victorious here because she could break through the pre-conceived norms and conditions of her traditional society even in an alien land. She kept her faith and remained calm to overcome the odds of that time.

Widows were forbidden to keep male friends or well-wishers in that typical setting. Hence, they were deprived of sexual pleasure which is regarded as a natural desire. No widow could rely on any man. Adah was searching for a way out, a path that

could lead her to deconstruct the set norms and conditions. She was delighted to find the way through education. While taking care of her five children she acquired education and a job, thus making her life a better than it used to be.

Emecheta left her husband in 1966. Though she had tried to save her marriage with all her tolerance and patience; her marriage failed. In her autobiography, "*Head Above Water*", Emecheta stated, "I set my heart on making a successful marriage, because they had taught us at the Methodist Girl's High School that prayers and devotion could move mountains. It did not work out for me that way." (pp. 23) She had prayed her marriage to work, she had hoped her husband to understand her abilities and desires, she had worshipped for her husband to be supportive and more than that she had devoted herself in pleasing and fulfilling the needs of her husband yet she failed as a 'wife'. She had followed the exact lessons she was given at her early age like the other women. She too believed in the lessons taught to her and accepted that her position as a wife was to please and satisfy her husband. But, she could not tolerate the injustice done against her anymore. After leaving her marriage and her husband, Emecheta had to suffer a lot. Without the help of any male, any family member, any money and even her husband; she had to take care of her five children all by herself. She herself regarded her struggle and survival as nothing less than miracle. In her autobiography "*Head Above Water*", Emecheta stated "As for my survival for the past twenty years in England, from when I was a little over twenty, dragging four cold and dripping babies with me and pregnant with a fifth one- that is a miracle." (pp. 5)

Her second novel "*Second-Class Citizen*" published in the year 1974, also deals with Emecheta's own experience. Though published two years later than her first novel "*In the Ditch*", in the chronological sense of the story, it comes first because it talks about the early childhood of the protagonist Adah, her dreams, her desires, her crave for education etc. and then walking out of marriage and searching for her own identity while struggling to survive in the white men's country, as the single parent with her five children. Adah is the mouthpiece of Buchi Emecheta through whom she presents her own sufferings for the novel is fully loaded with autobiographical tone. Just like the novelist, despite her wish, the protagonist too was deprived of suitable education by her parents for being a woman. Buchi Emecheta got married to Sylvester Onwordi at the age of sixteen. Over the six years of their happy married life, they had five children. She moved and settled in London with her marriage soon after her marriage. She supported

the family with the money she earned as a librarian. But in doing so, she had to break through the set norms and condition of her patriarchal and traditional society. "*Second-Class Citizen*" is a projection on her own life. She presents her own experiences and struggles through the character of Adah Obi. Much of her fictional works focused on sexual politics and racial prejudice based on her own experiences both as a single parent and a black woman living in Britain.

In her novels, we find the subjugation of women or the patriarchal order of the society where women are treated as below the level of men. As in her early life, she suffered the patriarchal norms like not being given education as her brother. She, in her novels, shows the 'unwanted-ness' of 'women' in the patriarchal society. Her novel, "*Second-Class Citizen*", is a record of her thorough exploration of the gender discrimination in native Nigerian society and in African immigrant communities in Britain. Adah's character in the novel, like majority women, in her works, is a second-class citizen, in Nigeria, whose parents initially denies her proper education and arranges her marriage. Thus, through the experiences of her own life she puts light on those parts of the so called patriarchal society where women are being subjugated, suppressed, dominated, marginalized and made the 'other' of the male 'self'. Here, Barbara Christian can be referred well enough, who, in one of her famous work, "*Black Feminist Criticism*" tries to give her voice to the voiceless black women who had to suffer so many social injustice because they were black and mainly because they were women. And hence they were regarded as the minor parts of the society. They were discriminated only because of their body color. They were not given any kind of preference or privilege. And same kinds of situations are seen in the life and works of Buchi Emecheta.

Emecheta's third novel "*The Bride Price*" (1976), presents the problems that the African women face in a typically traditional and men-ruled society. It received a lot of compliments from a number of noted critics. It also brought her name and fame in a global platform. This was the very novel of which manuscript was burnt by her husband. She had shown the manuscript to her husband for his approval. But, when he came to know about her secrecy, that she was writing a book; his suspicions got the answers. He did not read the manuscript for once. Rather, he burnt that. That was the point when Emecheta decided to leave her marriage for she felt like her husband had burnt her child. The plot of this novel centers round the protagonist Aku-nna's life. Aku-nna, a young woman, shows the courage to defy her native tribe's custom by marrying a man outside

her social class. Her father died when she was only thirteen years old and after that she was taken care by her father's brother. She was allowed education for her uncle thought that that would help increase her bride price. But she happened to fall in love with her teacher Chike who was a descendent of slaves. Though their social status prohibited their marriage, she eloped with him. A prophecy was made by her tribal myth that a woman whose bride price remains unpaid, dies in childbirth of the very first child. Though Akunna was a bit shaken by the prophecy, she bore positive thoughts for her life. But later on we find that her husband fails to pay her bride price. And as prophesized, Akunna died of childbirth.

After the completion of her first three works "*In the Ditch*", "*Second-Class Citizen*" and "*The Bride Price*" in England, she moved to the United States where she earned her living as a social worker in Camden, New Jersey. There she published her fourth novel, "*The Slave Girl*" in the year 1977. Emecheta was awarded the Jock Campbell Award for "*The Slave Girl*" in the year 1979, from *New Statesman*. She was also selected as the Best Black British Writer in 1978. In 1979, she was also honored with the title British Home Secretary's Advisory Council on Race. In the following years, her works became so famous and could get such a huge number of readers that she was soon entitled with One of Granta's "Best of the Young British Novelists" in the year 1983. With the spirit of never giving up and with the craving of more and more enlightenment, she finally happened to be awarded with the PhD degree under the University of London in 1991. She also worked with many cultural and literary organizations including the Africa Centre, London and with the Caine Prize for African Writing as a member of the Advisory Council.

Her award winning novel, "*The Slave Girl*", shows the predominant patriarchal order of the society. In this novel, Emecheta goes as far using slavery as universal condition of women in Nigeria. In this novel, Emecheta equates the institutions of slavery with marriage by simply exploring the conditions of the life of the protagonist Ojebeta, its heroine, first as a slave and then as a wife. Through her changed status, from a slave girl to a wife is simply described as change of masters and nothing more. It also depicts the limited opportunities and property status of women in Nigerian patriarchal society.

The story of the novel, "*The Slave Girl*" revolves round the life and happenings of Ogbanje Ojebeta. She was the beloved daughter of Okwuekwu and Umeadi. They got

her after a lot of worships and sacrifices. The baby girls that Umeadi gave birth before Ojebeta, could not survive for long. Although they had two healthy and happy sons, they always desired for a baby girl. And when Umeadi gets pregnant again, we find Okwuekwu “praying inwardly to Oboshi, the river goddess of their town Ibuza, to help his wife this time. He would have liked a baby girl....” (pp. 14)

Emecheta makes her heroine special by giving her importance. The fact that Ojebeta was special to her parents is demonstrated through her ogbanje charms, which her father brought from a dangerous place called Idu. As because the other baby girls of Okwuekwu and Umeadi had died, the villagers suggested them, “Your child will stay this time if you tie her with safety charms. These must consist of cowries, tops of tins brought here by the Potokis, and real bells made from metal.” (pp. 18) These charms were regarded to help Ojebeta frighten the evils away. Also the intricate facial tattoos and the charms were to ensure that she will not be sold into slavery. But this is ironical enough that the girl, who was the most desired asset of her parents and was never to be sold, had the most unpleasant happenings in her life. Even though the Ogbanje charms could frighten the evils away and could make her survive, they could not help her to have a life to call her own.

However, when Ojebeta’s parents die of ‘Felenza’, the seven-year-old girl was sold to a rich relative Ma Palagada, by her brother, Okolie. He sold her for eight pounds, and he used that money for his coming-of-age dance. And to get that money, he made his little sister walk and travel a long distance from Ibuza to Onitsha, a place where this relative Ma Palagada, a successful market trader was staying. Though Okolie knew that his little sister would have to suffer a lot at that place, yet he thought that it would be better for her as because none of her brothers was able to look after her, and besides they had no such relative apart from Ma Palagada to take care of her. This was a kind of society, where a male, when was not ready to take care of his own sister, was allowed to sell his sister to ensure his better future. Okolie not only sold his sister but also the importance and specialty of Ojebeta which Emecheta tried her best to give her heroine.

And opposite to what Okolie had expected, Ojebeta had to live the life of a slave in Onitsha. She was one of the many slaves at Ma Palagada’s house. However, because of Ma Palagada’s wealth and eventual conversion to Christianity, she was allowed to attend school; but only to make her learn how to sew and how to bake cake. Although we talk every now and then about women empowerment and all, yet it is an open secret that

women are still treated as some kind of objects which, take birth to please and satisfy the men folk. After failing with Ojebeta's specialty and importance, Emecheta now tries her best to give her heroine the chance to attain education.

Meanwhile, Ma Palagada's only son Clifford chooses Ojebeta to become his wife. Though the relationship would have meant a relief to Ojebeta's life for she could have become the mistress of the house after the marriage, yet that was another example of oppression for Ojebeta was told that that was a custom of marrying the slave. Anyway, like the novelist herself, the protagonist too here breaks through the norms and conditions. After the death of Ma Palagada, Ojebeta, with due permission of her master, Pa Palagada, goes back to her hometown and settles as a businesswoman. But the question that remains in the minds of the readers is that even after being educated, courageous and experienced girl, why she herself not paid her slavery money instead of letting her husband Jacob to pay her slavery money.

The society was set in that way, and the lives were accustomed to that. But, with the given enlightenment of education and knowledge, women started to realize their status in a male dominated society. They understood their position in the patriarchal society. They also realized what they were being deprived of and what they believed and what kind of faith they had kept. The things started to become clear. But, the entire women folk of Africa were yet to be aware of that knowledge. The lacking of education, knowledge and understanding caused the continuity of those social ills like discrimination and marginalization.

Here, in this regard, we can refer to one of Buchi Emecheta's very much remarkable work, "*The Joys of Motherhood*" (1979). It was with the success of this novel only, when Emecheta was invited to work as a visiting professor at several American universities and as a research fellow at the University of Caliber in Nigeria.

In this novel, Emecheta presents a rather modern, rich, colonized and changed society. But, the male-reign was still prevailing. Here we find the impact of colonialism upon the lives of African women. In the colonial society nothing regarding the men's life changed. Their living ways, their rights, their assumptions, their customs, their independence etc. were carried out from the traditional to the colonial society and were enjoyed by the males. But, everything in regard of the women's lives had changed. Every belief, every dream, every faith of the women were broken, shaken and became sour.

Even the joys of becoming a mother were no more the same. The males kept marrying and bringing wives and making love with them, and thus they were having more and more children. This was happening just like the way it had happened in the traditional setting. But, with all the changes that had come with colonialism, the traditional society had changed and everything were shrinking. The unity among the wives of the same husband broke and too many children became burden even to their own mothers because they were now unable to provide enough space, shelter and food like the ways the mothers and the fathers were capable before colonialism.

Nnu Ego here in the novel had to suffer a lot because of her too much faith and belief on the tradition, the culture and the society. The motherhood that Nnu Ego wanted so much desperately caused her a miserable death. Her last days were lonely and painful despite the fact that she had seven children. Through the character of Nnu Ego, Emecheta presents the concept of motherhood in a patriarchal society and how this very concept of motherhood destroys the very existence of women itself is also well presented in the novel. How the feeling and emotion of motherhood forces a woman to succumb to the extreme extent is also depicted here. Likewise Mariama Ba also has talked about motherhood in her epistolary novel "*So Long A Letter*" (1981). Here, in this novel Ba has presented motherhood as a barrier that binds a woman and deprives her from freedom. The central character of the novel, Ramatoulaye despises herself from her freedom and identity because she had a responsibility towards her 'motherhood' to fulfill. She preferred to stay by her husband's side even though it was quite clear to her that she did not mean much to her husband anymore. Even after her husband had brought a second wife, she chose not to leave him because her children were there who would need a father's identity. Also, she did not have the courage to play the role of a single parent nor did she ever dream of leaving her children at their father's place. Thus she was trapped in between her freedom and her motherhood.

Mariama Ba was a Senegalese writer who also was a feminist and used to write for the cause and betterment of women. Since her early age she had the courage to raise voice against the discriminations done between male and female. And she could understand that discrimination since an early age. Growing up under the shelter of traditional grandparents, Ba had to suffer a lot. Like Emecheta, Ba too had to fight for her rights to education and had to make her grandparents aware that education was as much important to the girls as it was to the boys. Ba had to suffer a lot even in her

married life. Because of the prevailing gender discrimination, she had a failed marriage. But, just like Emecheta, Ba too did not hesitate to divorce her husband. She found that option better than the life living under her husband's forgiveness. Ba too dared to take all the responsibilities of her nine children as a single parent just like Emecheta took the responsibilities of her own children. All the frustrations and disgusting feelings of Ba, against the patriarchal and polygamous society are expressed in her first novel "*So Long A Letter*". This work of hers got quite a number of attentions of the readers and brought her the first Noma Prize in the year 1980. She died because of a protracted illness even before her second novel, "*Scarlet Song*" (1986) got published.

Both Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta try through their writings to critique the idea of motherhood. In the traditional Igbo society, the role of the mother is very much important. According to their setting, a woman gets as much respect as the number of children she gives birth to. Childless or barren women were seen as 'nothing', not even as a part of the human world. They were discarded. In Flora Nwapa's "*Efuru*" (1966), colonization disturbed the old way of livelihood of the women socially, economically and politically. The position of women had changed and demoted. In the traditional pre-colonial society, though it wasn't like a paradise for the women, yet it gave some measures of freedom to them. Flora Nwapa is the first African woman novelist who had published her works in the English language in Britain. She is acknowledged as the mother of modern African literature. She was also the forerunner to a generation of African women writers. At the age of thirty, she achieved International recognition by Heinemann Educational Books for her first novel "*Efuru*". Emecheta was greatly inspired by Nwapa. In fact, she herself had expressed her desire to become a writer like Flora Nwapa through her mouthpiece Adah in "*Second-Class Citizen*". When Adah expressed her wish to write novels and showed her first manuscript to her husband, Francis and when he burnt the manuscript saying that black women could never become writers and that women were brainless; Adah referred to Flora Nwapa whom she had always looked forward to as her inspiration and as her guiding light.

Nwapa was a greatly educated woman with the BA degree from University College, Ibadan and a Diploma in Education from Edinburgh University. She had not only worked in schools to educate the children but also had worked as a social worker to uplift the society. All her hard works and efforts in the due course of becoming the first black woman novelist are well recorded in Marie Umeh's "*Emerging Perspectives of*

Flora Nwapa: Cultural and Theoretical Perspective Essays". Umeh's book contains the honoring and appraising words for Nwapa's success as an emerging black woman writer. When Nwapa published her first novel "*Efuru*" in the year 1966, she came to be recognized as the pioneer of English-language novel by an African woman. She had sent her transcript to Chinua Achebe before publication and not only got a very much positive reply from him but also he sent money for the postage to mail the manuscript to the English publisher, Heinemann. We get to know this kind and encouraging side of Chinua Achebe for the upcoming female writers through the biography written by Ezenwa Ohaeto, "*Chinua Achebe: A Biography*". This shows Achebe's support for the evolving women writers and such inspiring stories had inspired Emecheta to have her dream to become a writer even stronger grip over her.

In Nwapa's novel "*Efuru*", colonization had its positive impact upon Efuru. It helped her to gain 'identity', 'respect' and 'space' for herself in a society where, a 'failed woman' to give birth like her, was neglected. But, Efuru outdid that. She started to earn money with her business, and whatever money she earned, she used to help the sick, poor and needy people with that. She used to lend money without any interest. She became so successful in her business that she could overpower her husband. Women, who did well for the community, were respected in their society. Her mother was also like her. She followed her mother. And both mother and daughter took title, which was given to the male and rich women only.

Through Efuru's character, Flora Nwapa presents that motherhood is not the only criteria that a woman should go or look for. There are many more other potions that a woman could run after which can not only give her respect but also an 'identity' of her own. A woman's existence doesn't depend on how many children she could give birth to, but it depends on her courage, her determination and her will-power to be known as a woman first, to make her own identity and to overlook the biased and discriminating divisions.

But, in most cases it doesn't happen so. Because of the lack of Education and the lack of awareness to what extent education could help them to become enlightened; women are still living taking the traditionally set norms and conditions to be their ultimate goal. And to present this, Emecheta has come up with her remarkable piece, "*The Joys of Motherhood*". Here Emecheta not only criticizes the idea of motherhood but also the coming of colonialism. The traditional set up of motherhood fails to work in the

colonial setting. Women, who were bound to follow the rules and regulations of the societal norms, were shocked to find no position even after giving birth to a number of children. The expectations and demands of the husbands remained the same, only the identity of the women was shaken. The privileges that a woman enjoyed in the traditional society were lost in the colonial one. And therefore, the protagonist of the novel, Nnu Ego, suffers when she came to live with her second husband, in the newly colonized town, Lagos.

What Emecheta presents through this novel of hers is that whether it is a colonized place or non-colonized place, whether the setting is modern or traditional; a woman's place is always inferior in comparison to that of the males'. A woman will always be seen as a woman, who is weak, who is only an object of sex, who is a child producing machine, who pleases her husband and who does all the household chores. Lack of education has kept the womenfolk in a ditch from where they are not being able to come out. Women are suffering for they are now living in a colonized society and are bearing the ideals of the traditional one; hence they are not being able to cope up.

Bessie Head, another well-known woman writer from Africa, who speaks for the relegated sections, herself, had a painful life. She had a great struggle in her life. Her mother was a wealthy white South African woman and her father was a black servant. They had an interracial relationship, which was illegal in Africa. Her mother was claimed to be a mentally sick patient and Bessie was thus given birth secretly. Very soon, her mother killed herself and she was then brought up by foster parents. All these circumstances and her sufferings led her to become a writer and to write her woes. Like Buchi Emecheta, most of Bessie Head's writings too have an autobiographical tone. And, mostly she writes about the women victims and the sufferers. Like Buchi Emecheta, she too had a failed marriage and within three years of her marriage she abandoned her life in South Africa and settled in Botswana with her son. There she evolved as a writer. Her three major works are "*When Rain Clouds Gather*" (1968), "*Maru*" (1971), "*A Question of Power*" (1973). She has also written a number of short stories. Her works mainly deal with the everyday life of the ordinary people and their political struggles.

Her third novel; "*A Question of Power*", which is highly autobiographical, talks about the life of its central character, Elizabeth, who is regarded as none other than the author's replica. Like Elizabeth, Bessie Head too was born in a South African mental

hospital. Though her mother was a wealthy white woman who belonged to the upper-class, was forced to spend the rest of her life in the mental hospital for she became pregnant with the child of a black stableman. Both the protagonist and her author were raised by foster parents until they turned thirteen. As her mother had left a sum of money for her daughter, Bessie afforded herself with a high school education with that money. She had a failed marriage and eventually she walked off of her marriage after one and a half year. She had her only child with her to take care of. In her *“The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales”* (1977), she states, “it costs a woman too much to love a man.” (pp.106) Like Nwapa and Emecheta, Bessie too through her works, had set herself on a journey where her mission was to bring the suppressed section of the society forward. Her sufferings, struggles, her experiences of deprivation and discrimination etc. all are recorded with honesty and truthfully in her autobiographical writing, *“A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings”* (1990).

Unlike Nwapa, Head and Emecheta; Aidoo had a different and comfortable life. But, the subject matters of most of their writings are same. Aidoo was the daughter of Nana Yaw Fama, chief of Abeamzi Kyiakor. As she was the daughter of a king, she got all the princess-like treatments in everywhere. But the luxuries and comforts of her life couldn't stop her from writing the true stories of the society. She began her career when she started writing her play *“The Dilemma of a Ghost”* (1965), at the age of twenty two. Her play was so much of a success that it made her the first published African woman dramatist. In the play, she deals with a major issue of the African society, i.e. the impact of slavery. One of her best novels, *“Changes”* (1991) was awarded with the 1992 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book (Africa).

Through some of her remarkable writings like *“The Dilemma of a Ghost”* (1965), *“Anowa”* (1970), *“Our Sister Killjoy”* (1977), *“Changes”* (1991), *“No Sweetness Here”* (1995), Aidoo has presented the African society and its traditions. But, most of her protagonists are women, who rejected the stereotypical roles and traditional beliefs imposed upon them. Her deconstructive female protagonists are the images of 'new women' that all the feminists dreamt of. Though she had a comfortable life compared to that of the other women of her time, she never let that to blind her. She saw the harsh reality of the society and hence whatever she understood, she wanted to share with the every woman out there. Like Aidoo, Emecheta too dealt with the themes of gender stereotype, slavery, women subjugation, patriarchy etc. in her remarkable works and

tried to spread her knowledge and understanding through her writings to every nook and corner.

Emecheta started her career as a library officer in the British Museum in London for the period of 1965-1969. After that she decided to carry on as a youth worker and sociologist for the Inner London Education Authority. During the period of 1969-1976, she was an active youth worker. This was the time when she collected a lot of experience while visiting a lot of places and people. When she saw how situations and things differed for the black people compared to that of the Whiteman, she decided to record her experiences through her writings. Also, for the period of 1976 to 1978, she was an active community worker.

She became famous and one of the most widely read authors as soon as soon as she came up as a writer. Readers became aware of the plight and position of the black women living in Africa and in London. She could present their stories in their true color with the touch of some of her own life story, some from the things she herself witnessed in London, some from that she saw in her own hometown etc. But, what attracts us towards this writer is that even after settling as a well-read writer, she never stopped working for her community, she never quit her sociologist spirit to work for the relegated sections and to bring them forward.

Though she moved to London and settled in there, she never cut her roots. She was always rooted to her originalities. In Britain, amongst the western cultures, she always missed some of her traditions and cultures. In the interview “Have Women Progressed”, given at UCLA in November 1987, published in the journal UFAHAMU, Emecheta was asked by the interviewer, Joyce Boss:

JB: In all of your books, we see the difficult situations encountered by women who challenge what is traditionally expected of them. Is there a point which saying “no” to those expectations becomes a denial or betrayal of one’s culture?

BE: It can’t be. In my own case, I might say, “I’m all right in England; I have everything I need, my children are here—why should I go back?” But even though my own parents are not alive, I feel there is this thing inside of me which says, I must go there, I must share. It’s part of you. To completely say “no” to that culture would be a denial of my own personality, as an individual. I go to the village more often than some people who are in Lagos.

JB: So for you, the ties are still strong?

BE: Yes they're still there. (pp. 94)

(Source: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zj7w32n>)

After becoming a successful author, she travelled to many places as a visiting professor and lecturer. During the period of 1972-1979, when she was setting the plot of some of her best works, she visited several American universities like the Pennsylvania State University, the Rutgers University, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Through her struggle and never giving up spirit, she could achieve such a position that most of the Third World Women wouldn't even dream. What is astonishing in Emecheta's case, is that a person like her who was at first devoid of education, had a failed marriage, alienated in London, had to bear the burden of five children all by herself, was seen as a second class citizen; could make such an identity of hers on the international platform that her name has become worth mentioning whenever the discussion is about 'feminism'. Buchi Emecheta, who is now counted among the leading African Women Writers recounted in her autobiography, "*Head Above Water*", "If my marriage had worked, I would probably have... tucked myself away in a public library and dreamed of becoming a writer one day." (pp. 61)

Emecheta's autobiography, "*Head Above Water*" records the transcendent aspirations and inspirations under which she wrote. She had narrated in her autobiography that her marriage, her husband, her native land and her big mother had given her all the reasons and inspirations to write stories. She was happy to write from her experiences. After her divorce, she at first had to live as a tenant in Pussy Cat Mansion, London, where she had to suffer a lot as a single parent. Her bitter experiences with her landlord, her struggles as a student and her tough time as a poverty-ridden single parent served as a great deal of plot for her writings. She used to write short stories at first, which were published as columns in *The New Statesman* in 1971. Later, her children too became inherent part of her writings. Most of her writings deal with the tensions between the traditionalism and modernism, with the issues between the African monolithic practices and the Western views, with the problem between the old and the new and with the always lurking discrimination between men and women.

Then during the following years of 1980 and 1981, she was appointed as a Senior Resident Fellow and Visiting Professor of English in the University of Caliber, Nigeria.

In 1982, she was invited to deliver lecture at Yale University and the University of London for lecture programs held in the respective universities. Also, she held a fellowship at the University of London in the year 1986. While visiting the universities and doing various tasks, she was also running the Ogwugwu Afor Publishing Company, with the help of her journalist son Sylvester. In 1982, she took a permanent teaching position at the University of London.

Emecheta had visited a number of American universities including Pennsylvania State University, Rutgers University, the University of California and the University of Illinois. She had received an Arts Council of Great Britain bursary in the period 1982-1983. During that period she used to give lectures at Yale University and the University of London. Because of efforts to bring in a change in the lives of women, Buchi Emecheta was featured at the 98th number out of the hundred women recognized list by BBC History Magazine.

AFRICAN WRITERS SERIES

HEAD ABOVE
WATER

An Autobiography

BUCHI EMECHETA

Source: <https://goo.gl/images/371vv3>

Emecheta's another novel; *"Destination Biafra"* (1982) is a historical account about the civil unrest in Nigeria during the Biafran secessionist movement of the late 1960s. Debbie Ogedemgbe is the protagonist of the novel. Her father was a slain businessman. Ogedemgbe joins the movement on the side of a united Nigeria. In her next novel *"Double Yoke"* (1983), Emecheta presents the experiences of a college student, Nko. Nko's personal relationships and educational dreams are compromised by the gender politics of Nigeria. She was despised by her lover for permitting premarital sex with him. Later on she was seduced by a manipulative professor of her college. She became pregnant shortly after that incident. She was disillusioned in her college life. In 1983, Emecheta was successful to receive an Arts Council of Great Britain scholarship. In *"The Rape of Shavi"* (1984), Emecheta presents the impact of European imperialism in Africa. Here she talks about the Shavians, who are regarded as the idyllic tribe of African cattle farmers. They are also regarded to be the ones who have kept their tribe's mythical values alive for they remained uncorrupted even after coming in contact with the West. But later in the novel we find that a plane crashes in their lands and finally the white men saw a tribe who were yet to accept their norms and conditions. Since then they started to abuse the innocent tribe's faith, their natural resources were exploited, their farms were rooted out; and they were introduced with the guns and greed. And the Shavians were devastated by war, drought, and famine.

Emecheta's fictions not only project the happenings of her native land; but also project the historical background, the societal beliefs, the traditionally set norms and conditions etc. But, mostly her focus remains on the plight and position of the womenfolk who struggle in their entire lives just to survive in the patriarchal family structures, the biased and gender discrimination and the contradictory societal values in the colonial and postcolonial Africa.

Emecheta's *"Gwendolyn"* (1989), projects the difficult life of the protagonist Gwendolyn who was a young Jamaican immigrant. She had to go through a lot of bitter experiences like rape, incest and racism. She was molested by a family friend. At last she decided to escape from Jamaica and she went to live with her parent in a meager London neighborhood. There she happened to have an incestuous relationship with her father and became pregnant with his child. Her father committed suicide out of shame after this incident. *"Kehinde"* (1994), talks about a middle aged Nigerian woman who gave up her professional career in England so that she could spend more time in her native land with

her husband. When Kehinde returned to Nigeria, she was welcomed by the second wife of her husband. Soon she realized that her earlier position was shattered in the household though she was an educated woman and the senior wife. Realizing that the narrow and the traditional set up of her native people could help her in no way she again decided to go to England where she was at least having self-respect. Emecheta's "*Kehinde*" is a fine example of how a woman who is enlightened with education, who has self-respect, who was a working woman and most of all, who had an 'identity'; decides to break through her polygamous marriage and society, because she was seen and treated as an object.

Whatever Emecheta believed or said, were always put to practice. It is not that her support for the discriminated womenfolk was only verbal. She spoke her mind through her works also. We can find a lot of examples of deconstruction in her works, which is the deconstruction of the suppressing patriarchal order. In her novel like "*Second-Class Citizen*", we find the protagonist Adah who was being denied of education, married at a young age and left to look after five children alone later raises her position in London. Also, here, the protagonist, in spite of her second class status, engages in a tenacious struggle for freedom and self achievement which ultimately allows her to improve her situation through education. The female protagonists of Emecheta's fictions challenge the masculine. They were tired with the fact that their values reside in their ability to bear children and their willingness to remain confined at home.

Initiative and determination become the distinguishing marks of Emecheta's women. They are resourceful and turned adverse conditions to their fame, whereas men are characterized as lazy and passive. At the end of "*Second-Class Citizen*", Adah become conscious of her potentiality and supports her children all alone, whereas her husband Francis keeps failing in his university exams and is still jobless. Adah's ability to come out of the ditch where her marriage has thrown her is paralleled by Emecheta's own progress as a writer which she details in her autobiography "*Head Above Water*". The book subverts the common notion that a public life doesn't necessarily compromise a women's attachment to her family. Also, she conveys a very important message through her novel, "*In the Ditch*", that a woman can come out of the 'ditch' of the society only if she can raise her voice against the pre-conceived norms and notions, if she has that much of courage, and if she is determined enough to make her will power to

be heard, seen and noticed. Even many prominent critics like Anthony Barthelemy, Michael Popkin, Marie Umeh etc. have noticed such things in the works of Buchi Emecheta, that they have written all about such social inequalities and social hardships faced by the African black women and Emecheta herself. Marie Umeh, in her critical essay, "*African Women in Transition in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta*", has mentioned how Emecheta actually had gone through so many struggles and so many transitions in her life which is depicted more often in her novels. Critics have admitted that Buchi Emecheta actually writes what she herself had seen and experienced in her real life, right from the patriarchy, women subjugation, racial discrimination, social injustice, gender discrimination, marginalization etc. to deconstruction. And therefore, these are the prominent themes in most of her works.

Emecheta published her autobiography "*Head Above Water*" in the year 1986. But before that the autobiography of a woman was regarded to be somewhere there in the shadow of their male counterparts. Earlier it was believed and accepted that there were some ways for a woman to write an autobiography. And they were that the woman herself may tell it as an autobiography, or she may tell in the form of a fiction, she may also write about it in advance unconsciously or without naming the process. But in a way or the other the problem was that it was a tough task for the female autobiographers to resist the pressure of the masculine autobiography as they were the only samples available in that genre. And hence, it was hard for the female autobiographers to present their writings with a female ideal. Eventually it happened that the academicians and the popular historians regarded the female autobiographies as just a mine of biographical information only and hence they were unreliable.

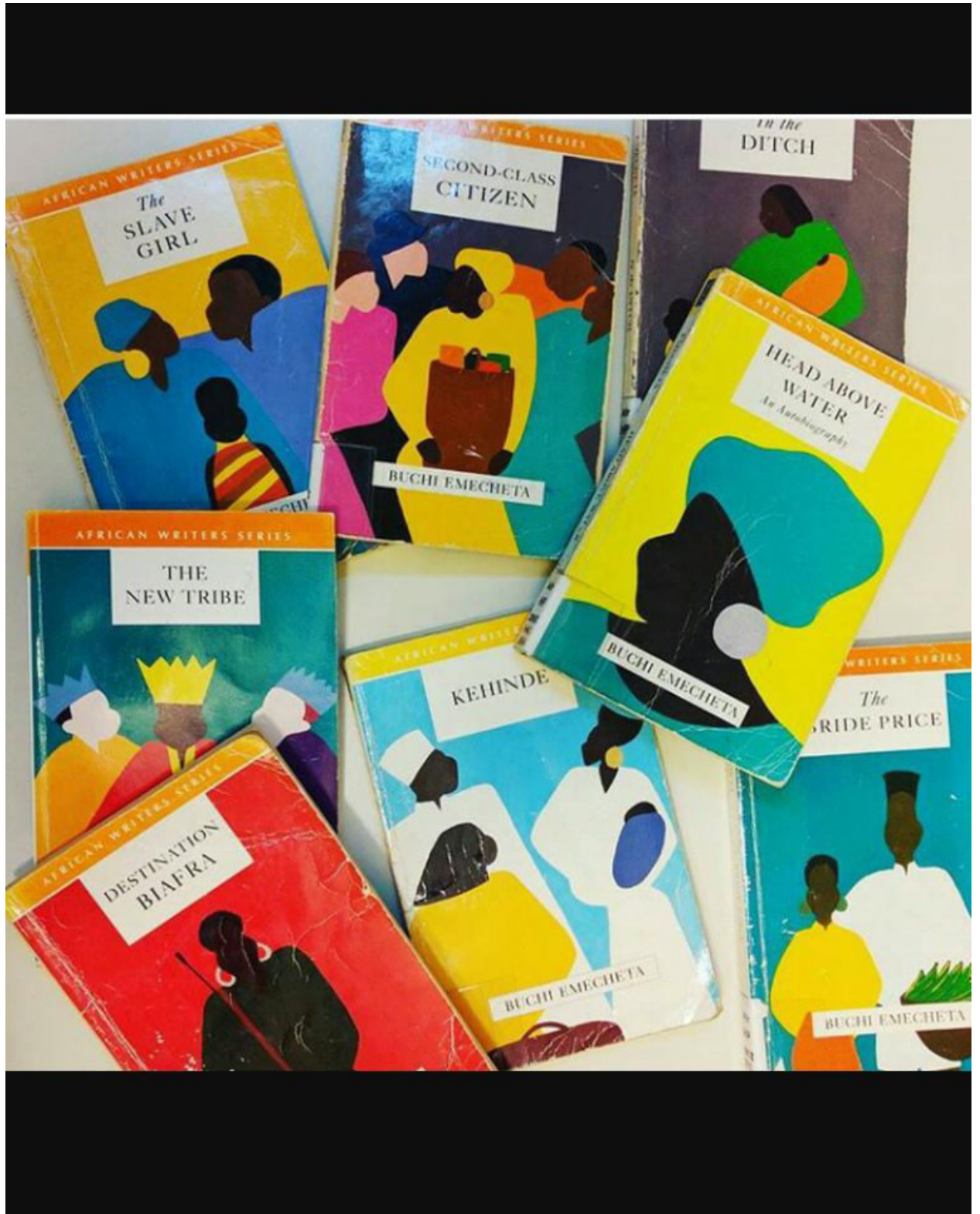
But it was not the case with Emecheta's autobiography. She was so true with her autobiography that as soon as Emecheta's "*Head Above Water*" came in the hands of the readers, it became the mouthpiece of those women who have suffered a lot in the long run of patriarchy and male chauvinism. She has recorded her own experiences, her struggles for survival in a patriarchal society, her realizations of the polygamous setting, her awareness of the value of education etc. Her "*Head Above Water*" can also be regarded as the plot of her two best-known novels "*In the Ditch*" and "*Second-Class Citizen*" where she gave her protagonists the kind of lives and experiences that she herself went through in her own life.

Though Emecheta had a failed marriage, though she had to suffer a lot of bitter experiences; yet they contributed to the plot of her autobiography which ultimately brought her unique success. After her failed marriage, she found herself with her five children in the ditch of an alien land. But she managed to pull herself out of that ditch and fight for her 'identity' in a land where she was regarded as a second class citizen for being a black in the land of the whites, and also for being a woman in the patriarchal setting. Emecheta succeeded in exploiting and breaking through those societal norms and conditions, and brought herself to a position where she not only made an 'identity' of her own, but also she is appreciated by the whites in their lands.

For all that she has done, for all that she has contributed to the English Literature and for all the voice that she has raised not only for herself but also for all those whose voice is hushed; Emecheta is recognized as one of the best and leading female voice in the contemporary African Literature. With such hard work, Emecheta has not only gained a national platform, but also she has earned an international platform. She is hugely read and appreciated for her depiction of the African women and especially her native Nigerian women, in the true color. Emecheta, with her fellow writers like Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Ba etc. is able to acquire a female presence in the male dominated literature of the contemporary Africa. Emecheta is often classified as a feminist for all her works deal and are written with the feminist perspective. But Emecheta has her own views. She differentiates her views and ideas from that of the Western feminists, and regards her perspective to be that of Afro-centric one. In fact she describes herself as an African feminist with a small 'f'.

Here Emecheta's own words from one of her interviews can be referred where she had said how after becoming an educated woman and after acquiring the knowledge of female rights, it was her duty to make others understand that. Also, Emecheta and many of her fellow contemporary writers believed 'education' to be the only key to make that happen. Women need to be educated to be able to free themselves from the clutches of the tradition and culture. In the interview "Have Women Progressed", given at UCLA in November 1987, published in the journal UFAHAMU, Emecheta had answered to Joyce Boss:

JB: An interesting point you brought up in your talk yesterday is the question of whether women have progressed. You say that in some ways, women are going around in circles, but it seems you see education as a way out of that circle.



Source: <https://goo.gl/images/GPVfaS>

BE: Yes, that is the key. Once a woman is educated up to a certain level, then she will have the confidence to communicate with her sister outside of that culture and will be able to compare notes. And maybe they can learn from each other. Until that is available to almost all women, we will be going around in circles. (pp. 95)

(Source: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4zj7w32n>)

Emecheta has also written three children's books, namely "*Titch the Cat*" (1979) that talks about a family who adopt a cat and started to care for it; "*Nowhere to Play*" (1980) that talks about a group of school children living in London who face the difficulty in finding a safe place to play during their summer vacation, and "*The Wrestling Match*" (1983) that deals with a period after the Nigerian Civil War where the elders of a small village try to teach a lesson to a disobedient group of boys of that village. Through the above mentioned stories, Emecheta has also tried to win the minds of the young and adult readers. The stories cause interest and curiosity while reading them. Apart from that, Emecheta has also written few dramas. One of her dramas, "*A Kind of Marriage*" was broadcasted in BBC television in 1976 and those episodes became the plot of her play "*A Kind of Marriage*" which was published in the year 1986 by Macmillan.

It is not that Emecheta has not gone through criticism. Her tradition based settings, her psychologically strong protagonists, and her own critique over the social and traditional African setting etc. all of them go through serious criticism and most of the times they happen to come out with positive result by viewing her as a strong and undaunted writer. Her "*The Joys of Motherhood*" has remained an all-time celebrated novel, while her "*In the Ditch*" and "*Second-Class Citizen*" are written on her real life framework. "*The Bride Price*" and "*Double Yoke*" have received a huge critical appreciation, while her "*The Slave Girl*" received enormous appraisal and even she was awarded for it. Also, when she departed from her personal subjects to the different and wide fields through her works "*Destination Biafra*" and "*The Rape of Shavi*", she became victorious there also. It is not that the critics and the reviewers don't find faults in Emecheta's manner of writing where she at times keeps repeating the same incidents of her life and at times for being highly personal. But nonetheless, she is consistently praised and admired for her involvement and hard work for the betterment of the womenfolk, for bringing the real-life-stories of the Nigerian women who were living their lives in the shadows of their male counterparts, for putting light on what

motherhood means for a woman, for recording the impact of colonialism or Westernization upon the lives of women of Africa etc.

In this way, almost through all of her major works, Buchi Emecheta has presented the society where she lives in, and where the 'women' are totally neglected and looked down upon as incapable of anything. But Emecheta presents her protagonists very much powerfully, that her heroines are always seen active with an independent voice, who resemble mostly with Emecheta's real life story and struggles. Through her works she gives a very important message especially to the 'women' that it is very much necessary for 'women' to realize their deserving rights and freedom, and that they are not lacking behind anything compared to the 'men'. And also that 'women' should raise their voice against the social ills and also should break through the barriers to come out of the 'ditch', where they were forced to stay by the 'male dominated patriarchal society'. And it can be said that Emecheta, through her works, wants to enlighten the 'women' to raise their voice in order to deconstruct the patriarchal society by deconstructing the women subjugation and male domination.

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