

A Beacon for the Bright Future: An Identification and Application of Emancipatory Strategies for Women in Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke***Author**

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Abstract

Buchi Emecheta, a prolific literary giant, who is known for championing the cause of black women in Africa and Diaspora, has crafted more than twenty books elucidating the ordeals and the pitiable plight into which the black women have been ditched for ages. Her contribution to the literary world is widely acclaimed by many as her writings reflect her personal and community pathos comprehensively. Her versatile nature is exhibited through her multifaceted dimensions of an orator, essayist, novelist, and playwright. Her resurgence from nothingness to the pinnacle of fame is a testimony that her writings are very relevant and useful in today's world. It would be crystal clear to anyone who reads her novels that her writings principally evolve around on twofold agendas. Firstly, it aims at exposing the harassment that women are prone to suffer under patriarchy and secondly, she crafts out series of plan of actions to overcome such hazards. It is her intellectual competency and acumen enables her to strategize effective mechanism to combat all the forces that are oppressive towards women.

Keywords: Violence, Emancipation, Strategy, Patriarchy, Feminism.

Buchi Emecheta's recognition and reputation as a renowned literary writer is widely acknowledged around the world. Her growth as a prominent literary writer, essayist, orator, playwright and dramatist is incomprehensible. Having hailed from a very humble origin, she rose to occupy the pinnacle of fame in the heart of African literature. She concurred with the idea of Ngugi wa Thiongo', who reiterated that "the product of a writer's pen both reflects reality and also attempts to persuade us to take a certain attitude to that reality" (7). Buchi Emecheta through her writings addresses the reality of women across the world and principally focuses her attention on culling out the hazards and the hardships of African women in particular. Invariably, every reader who glimpse through her writings would agree that her novels are not born out of her sheer imaginations, but rather are masterly crafted works, anchored on her personal experience of torments and turbulence. Ernest N. Emenyonu in an article entitled "Technique and Language in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*" states that "Many of the reflections in Emecheta's novels are of her own life and the lives of people close to and around her. She asserts that the events that found her "in the

ditch” and submerged her humiliatingly as a “second-class citizen” are “90% autobiographical” (252).

It is obviously true that a literature born out of an author’s personal experience and inspiration would have far reaching consequences and impact in the lives of the readers than literature that is purely fictional in character, which is merely intended to instruct. Her experience blended with deep seated reflection and interpretation makes her writings interesting and relevant. The novelist also having experienced the pangs of pain in Nigeria, which was reeling under the British colonial power, was aware of the double oppression that women experienced both under the foreigners and the native men. Hence forth, she was determined to offer suggestions and strategies for women to salvage themselves. She understood that she had a greater responsibility and was conscious of the definitive role that she had to play as a writer for the social transformation of Nigeria and Adewale Maja-Pearce also affirmed that “writers should be catalysts of social change” (xiii).

Buchi Emecheta’s novels became more authoritative since they vividly portray her as the archetype and prototype of women’s emancipation in the African context. Through reading her autobiographical writings and other novels one could witness how she shines forth as a defender and a torchbearer of women’s legacy and redemption, and how she champions for women’s cause. Despite being pushed to the periphery from the centre, she did not let herself become a victim. The odds and the onslaught unleashed on her personally did not quench her passion for emancipation. It was her resolute will and indomitable spirit emboldened her to combat against the structure that attempted to dehumanize and enslave women. Her resurgence from the gutter to the heights bewilders everyone as she is complimented for being courageous and outspoken through her works. It is amazing that as a recipient of many honorary literary awards she adds an additional feather to her cap as her writings are being undertaken for research in many languages across the world. It is authenticated by Marie Umeh, who in her article entitled “(En)Gendering African Womanhood: Locating Sexual Politics in Igbo Society and Across Boundaries” indicates that Emecheta’s versatile nature and relevance is manifested obviously as her novels are translated into fourteen major languages of the world including Dutch, French, German and Swedish (xxiii).

The novelist is complimented for having done a commendable job to the field of world literature in general and to the African literature in particular. Her writings transcend the geographical boundaries and therefore she believes herself to be a “citizen of the world” (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 97). While analysing the impact of Nigerian novelists’ writing in English, Joseph McLaren in an article entitled “The Nigerian Novel in English: Trends and Prospects” compliments Buchi Emecheta and affirms that her writings have been received with greater admiration along with other Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri by the readers of the West (234). As a writer she has done justice in expounding the plight of black women within her native Nigeria and in Diaspora. What differentiates her from other writers is

that she has the hallmark of exposing the cruel menace of the patriarchy and their institutionalized subjugation of women in sensible and realistic terms, since she was personally subjugated.

It is captivating that a reader can personally capture and visualize the predicaments of women when he or she skims through her writings. She is unique for crafting effective mechanisms and tactics for women to thrive and strive in all precarious situations. Invariably, all her novels are intended to empower the morale of the women and to salvage their redemption through the effective use of emancipatory strategies. She was firm to believe that the oppressive things of the patriarchal power will fall apart if women unite themselves to take up the responsibility of obtaining freedom through the employment of effective measures. The same idea is echoed by Miriam Schneir, who in her book entitled *The Vintage Book of Feminism: The Essential Writings of Contemporary Women's Movement* quotes the statement of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's foundational speech at the Seneca Falls in 1848 which marked the beginning of feminist movement, inviting all women to shoulder the responsibility on their own to fight for their cause. Elizabeth Cady Stanton mentioned that "woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degradation" (ix).

Ezenwa-Ohaeto in an article entitled "Replacing Myth with Myth: The Feminist Streak in Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*" quotes the exhortation of a renowned Africa's female scholar Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, who asserts that "it is up to women to combat their social disabilities; to fight for their own fundamental and democratic rights, without waiting for the happy day when men will willingly share power and privilege with them- a day that will never come" (156). The message that is conveyed to the women of the world in general and to the women of Africa in particular is crystal clear that they need to fight for their redemption. Thus, the author lays emphasis on the personal responsibility that a woman must shoulder upon herself and the hard work one needs to put up in order to have her heyday.

In spite of the progress that women have made in different spheres of life, the plight of women continues to be grim generally. Although, many may claim that the condition of women in Europe is far better, still none can deny that the women in Asia and Africa are at the receiving end of the onslaught of patriarchy. It is conspicuous that men who are at helm of affairs, especially in institutions like family, industry, enterprises and other prominent organizations continue to inflict pain upon women and it is being continued. They have been looked down upon as weak, feeble and second class citizens. While explicating the deplorable and defaming condition of women in the world of patriarchy, Susan Arndt in her article entitled "Buchi Emecheta and the Tradition of *Ifo*: Continuation and "Writing Black" refers to the term "the Other" originally used by Simone de Beauvoir in her celebrated book *The Second Sex*. The term indicates to the fact of social discrimination experienced by blacks and women (53).

It is alarming to know that the growth of women has not improved even in 20th century, and indeed it would be a herculean task for women to progress in life especially in the world of men. Thus, time and again, a reader can come across women of strong characters emerging to combat the patriarchy even in adverse situations, since men serve as stumbling block for women's growth. While indicating the necessity to do away with the dominion of patriarchal power and the need to attain intellectual acumen by women, Duangrudi Suksang in an article entitled "Overtaking Patriarchy: Corbett's and Dixie's Visions of Women" quotes William Thomson's ideas from his book entitled *Appeal of One-Half the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men*, where he admonished women to "AWAKE, ARISE, SHAKE OF THESE FETTERS" and "Acquire the mental power of seeing them" in order that "they are loosened forever." He further quotes Ernst Bloch's term "overtake" patriarchy since it would enable women to have "social equality" (74). Women who are bold and resilient are prepared to face any daunting experience, and they come out with flying colours as successful leaders even when they are coerced into toughest moments. It is their commitment and yearning for emancipation emboldens them even when they are surrounded with difficulties. They are aware that to excel in life they need to devise new measures and techniques, which would serve as means of their redemption. Hence, strategies and tactics play a vital role for obtaining emancipation for women.

In the quest for women's emancipation, one would be aware of the strategies admonished and adopted by erudite women like Patricia Yaeger, Andrea Dworkin, Anne Koedt, Betty Friedan and other prominent feminist writers. Patricia Yaeger suggests that 'language games' can salvage women from slavish condition, while Anne Koedt envisages 'consciousness raising' as a useful tool to free women from shackles and fetters. According to Adrienne Rich and Betty Friedan 'education' would empower women and hence, women are called to take up the responsibility of qualifying themselves in the field of academics. Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, who proposed the theory of *Snail Sense Feminism*, exhorted women to imbibe the qualities of snail in their fight for their survival. She goes on to say that to survive in a conflicting situation of male chauvinism, women need to adapt strategies like 'effective dialogue and negotiation', 'acquisition of good education' and maintaining 'individuality' of their own. (Jayraj 195)

Emecheta was well aware that the Igbo community to which she belonged was structured to suit the requirements of male chauvinism, and its efforts were geared towards downplaying the dignity and the worth of native women by constructing false and fabricated myths and assumptions. The novelist herself was put into severe predicaments perpetrated by her family and her community men. She was often reprimanded and looked down upon for having revolted against the patriarchal system and for having attempted to dismantle the myths that are erroneously attributed to women and feminism. It is said that "Buchi Emecheta, in order to counter the myth of male chauvinism in African Literature, fashions her own myths of female superiority" (Ohaeto 155). While explaining the myths that are associated with feminism

erroneously, Susan M Shaw and Janet Lee articulate in their book entitled *Women's Voices, Feminist Visions: Classic and Contemporary Readings* that

Feminists are angry, whiny women who have an axe to grind, who have no sense of humour, and who exaggerate discrimination against women. Feminists hate men and want to be like men and selfishly want to create new systems of power over men. All feminists are said to be lesbians, women who choose romantic relationship with other women. Feminists are said to reject motherhood to consider children a burden, and to have rejected all things feminine... (16)

Buchi Emecheta needs to be congratulated for being vociferous in exposing the physical and sexual harassment that she underwent under her husband Sylvester Onwordi. It is registered in her autobiography *Head Above Water* that Sylvester being callous and autocratic, found amusement in manipulating her sexually. Emecheta reiterates, "he would corner me, demanding sex, when he knew that I was about to go to work. I had to give in because of the children" (35). It is appalling for a reader to know that despite undergoing an excruciating pain, she never failed to confront the exploitation of the hierarchical structure of her community in her writings. It would be crystal clear to anyone who reads her novels that her writings principally evolve around twofold agendas. Firstly, it aims at exposing the harassment that women are prone to suffer under patriarchy and secondly, she crafts out series of plan of actions to overcome such ordeals and experience liberation. (McLaren 236) Appalled at her contribution for the growth of African women, Ezenwa-Ohaeto compliments Buchi Emecheta by saying that

She is a committed writer (committed to feminism) whose sympathies lie with a literature that outlines a plan of action for the liberation of the African woman. She is correspondingly hard on those characters, no matter how inappropriate their embodiment of masculine views or how vibrant their personalities, who fail to demonstrate a consciousness for the liberation of the African woman. (165)

Double Yoke revolves around the story of protagonist Nko, an attractive young girl, who had been coerced to face physical and sexual harassment under pervert men, who attempt to thwart her plan of climbing up the ladder of life. She was caught up between the double burdens of carrying the modern demands of city culture and being faithful to ethos of her ancestors. In pursuit of her ambition, she had to face hardships. She dreams to graduate herself in a reputed university of Nigeria, since she was convinced that her education would guarantee an employment and economic stability for her and her family. She was caught up between her world of dreams and reality, where she knew that she had to pay a very heavy price in the hands of Ete Kamba, her lover and Professor Ikot if she were to accomplish her plans. Emecheta offers a picturesque presentation of how Nko developed her consciousness raising, and implemented several techniques to emerge as a winner. Ete Kamba's success in the entrance examination of the University of Calabar and obtaining of scholarship leads to have a solemn celebration in the village. Ete Kamba's first encounter with Nko during the celebration results in sexual

exploitation. The novelist explains that Ete Kamba took Nko to a lonely place in the night and satiated his sexual urge by ravaging her. It is said:

He bore on her unceremoniously half pushed and half dragged her towards the walls of this unfinished house, then right to a corner inside. He was determined. He had squared his shoulders ready to combat any protest, but none came. For once Nko allowed to touch, to fondle and to know her. She allowed him, she gave in, and she gave him all, her body yielding, responding to his demands, his thirst, his hunger...he surprised Nko; he surprised himself...They stayed there for a very long time, until she started to wilt. Her legs became weak. (51-52)

Ete Kamba's act of amusing himself by undertaking aggressive sexual exploitation of Nko did not strengthen their bond of relationship. Despite ravaging her, he was pre-occupied with the thought of her virginity, although Nko offered 'with sincerity her most prized possession of virginity' (Ohaeto 161). It was shocking to note that he did not feel any sense of remorse for raping Nko but blamed himself for being in haste to engage in sexual acts with her without verifying her virgin status. As he was unaware of her virginity, he accused and defamed her by calling her as "A whore, a shameless prostitute!" (Emecheta 57). It was obnoxious to notice that his statements were derogatory in nature and it increased Nko's agony further. Having been frustrated with himself and his affair with Nko, he was at the height of despair and began to spit flames of fire on her through his words. He was very cruel in his remarks which denigrated her badly.

Ete Kamba tried to refute her argument by saying that men never become prostitutes but only women. However, Nko did not remain submissive to his remark, instead, proved him wrong by saying that she had read about male prostitutes. The reply of Nko further enraged him and therefore, he started to thrash her, which was a traditional method that men employed to subjugate women. The novelist states that "He resorted to the method he knew was the quickest and the most effective - the brutal near animal method. He started to beat her up" (60). He displayed his anger on her by trouncing her mercilessly and threatened her with severe consequences. Thus, he wanted her to become obedient to his commands and never raise her voice against him. In the midst of their brawl and altercation she felt that Ete Kamba disgraced her and therefore their relationship would end in jeopardy. When such thought flashed across her mind, she was overpowered by Ete Kamba. He was like a hungry predator that waited for its prey, leaped on her and ravaged her against her will. She did not object when he leaped on her body to gratify his sexual urge. She was convinced that there was nothing left for her to be safeguarded. Her innocence had been lost and he had deflowered her already and what else were there to preserve. Having been coerced into such humiliating act, she wriggled out in pain (60).

Emecheta presents another event of sexual onslaught on Nko by Professor Elder Ikot, who under the pretension of guiding and correcting her essays took advantage in exploiting her. Professor Elder Ikot disguised himself as a spiritual and pious person in front of others, but in

reality he was a pervert, who was totally corrupt and immoral in character. Having convinced Nko to accompany him to Kwa Falls cunningly (135), he made use of the opportunity to rape her. Being in a reputed position as a professor and the future prospect for the post of Vice-chancellor of the University, he did not display etiquette, but rather exhibited promiscuous behavior. Having been pushed into such an inadequate and uncomfortable position, Nko could not overcome his grip over her. After the orchestration of the professor's sexual conquest on her, she said, "have you finished now? I must have a wash" (140). The act of rape tormented and inflicted pain upon Nko and she felt cheated by Ete Kamba, whose confession of his maiden sexual relationship with Nko to the Professor motivated Elder Ikot to take advantage on her sexually.

The novelist employs several techniques for women's emancipation and she purposefully calls education as 'Woman's survival armour,' (92) since she knew that it was only education that enabled her to script her own destiny. Nko, the protagonist, was convinced that a woman to survive in modern time, education would play a prominent role. Hence, she works hard relentlessly to make use of the tool of education to resurge in all predicaments. She was convinced that university education would offer her bright future. The same thought was echoed by Nko's mother, who believed that education of her daughter would improve the financial position and growth and would ensure respect and dignity within her community. Therefore Nko was advised by her mother, who said:

You have seen that people who went to such places came out better equipped financially to cope with this expensive country. You have also seen that without money no one is respected here anymore. And you know that you can get all these things by going there. You have heard me shout with sheer joy on your admission to Unical, and you have seen my friends congratulate me on the one hand, and then envy me on the other hand, all for having such a brilliant daughter...Personally, I will say yes, take a chance...You will be even be better off.... (95)

The first wave feminists who fought for the cause of women envisaged that education would be a key factor in ensuring economic independence for women. The same idea is mirrored in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where she emphasized the need for 'establishing proper day-schools' with an intention of developing the relationship between both the sexes, and the requirement of education is endorsed further in novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill*, since education would ensure self-respect and independence (Gamble 222). The importance of educating women in higher-standards is reiterated by Adrienne Rich in an essay entitled 'Toward a Woman-Centered University', where she stressed that the traditional university system must be 'dehierarchized' and should pave way for inculcating curriculum which would address the concern of the community at large. In this way, she argues that women will 'assume any real equality within the academic world' (Gamble 223).

In the midst of sexual harassment that Nko underwent, she did not lose hope but reiterated her claim to professor Elder Ikot and said, “I want a First Class honours degree. I don’t care how you do it, I want a First Class honours” (140). Despite being forced to bear the double yoke- Becoming a wizard in academics which would ensure her prosperous future in modern time, and binding herself to the traditional cultural demands of becoming a wife and bearing children for her husband, she did not let herself to be vanquished by the patriarchal power. She was ready to risk and challenge the situation. While resonating the thought of Nko, the author hints:

Was such a degree worth her losing her good name, and may be Ete? But she did not want to lose either...She must either have her degree and be a bad, loose, feminist, shameless, career woman who would have to fight men all her life; or do without her degree, and be a good loving wife and Christian woman to EteKamba and meanwhile reduce her family and herself to being beggars at Ete’s table. Oh blast it all! She was going to have both. She was going to manoeuvre these men to give her both. They thought they could always call the tune and women like her must dance to it. With her, they were going to be wrong. (135)

In the episode of Ete Kamba’s suspicion of Nko’s virgin status and his aggressive arguments led to have jostling with Nko. Having been disparaged by his scathing attack, she became vociferous in her remark and said “you called me a prostitute because of that, but you forgot that it takes two people at least to make any woman a prostitute, by your definition. You seem to be forgetting the men who slept with the woman. So if I am one, then what are you?”(58). It was unbelievable that Nko had possessed ‘the power of tongue’ within her. Therefore, she did not consent to the accusations leveled against her and disapproved his allegations with the power of her speaking and arguing skill. While emphasizing the importance of the power of tongue, Carla Kaplan in her article entitled “Women’s Writing and Feminist Strategy” quotes from anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston’s auto ethnographical collection of African and American Folklore book *Mules and Men* where she said, “*Don’t you know you can’t get de best of no woman in de talkin’ game? Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got*” (339).

In another instance, where Nko had to confront professor Elder Ikot, the same tactic was again employed by her. In the background of sexual molestation she underwent in the hands of the professor, she was determined to claim her degree and hence she attempted to convince him with the power of her tongue and said, “...I’ll tell you sir that most girls here come to read for their degrees. If they become what you think, which is ‘prostitutes Nigerian style’, it is because people like you made them so. But with me sir, you are not going to be let off lightly.”(141) It is surprising to note that Nko being a student intimidates professor Elder Ikot with severe consequence if she were not to be offered her university degree. The power of her tongue forced the professor to consent to her proposal.

Buchi Emecheta's heroine Nko boldly debunks the traditional myth - man takes advantage of a woman who works under him. The novelist implies the same myth to "ameliorate the unfortunate transformation of Nko, who succumbs to temptations and decides to apply the age-old tactic using what she has to get what she wants"(Ohaeto 162). It may be a surprise for a reader to know how Emecheta's protagonist blackmails the professor without being submissive and to substantiate it further, Ohaeto quotes Acholonu who consents that "Emecheta's solution to the woman's problem is avant-garde and in itself brutal..." (162). It is said clearly that the end result of sexual act of the professor upon Nko lets Emecheta's heroine to "gain emancipation through promiscuity" (162).

In the series of several emancipatory strategies advocated by Buchi Emecheta, the reader can come across the importance of 'keeping secrets' by women within themselves play a pivotal role. In *Double Yoke* Ete Kamba told Nko that they would get married soon after they complete their exams and thus he expected her to be like his mother, who was obedient and who in his perspective never hid her secrets but rather spoke openly. After listening to his expectation and demand of being open to him always infuriated Nko. Hence, she said, "... A woman who tells all is no longer a woman. Our little secrets make us women; they are part of our survival kit..." (63). It is said generally that women tend to keep all their secrets within themselves in order that their security may not be at risk. When Nko's university admission form was secured by Professor Elder Ikot, it was said by Nko's mother not to let know about it to Ete Kamba. She was shrewd to understand that Ete Kamba may snap his relationship with Nko and hence, she reiterated the importance of keeping secrets and cautioned her daughter and said, "...would you have had the courage to tell him that Professor Ikot got those forms for you? You knew he would be angry. If you didn't know that, then my daughter, you were still not a woman. But I'm sure you know now" (93).

It is amazing to know that the novelist having emerged from Igbo background was fully aware of the importance of women associations and groups that were prevalent in her community, and they were established to empower women. The author ensures that the role of women is emphasized in all her novels, and they are created mainly to play a prominent role in support of the protagonist. The traditional institutions such as "age-group associations, the association of wives of particular lineage" (Ezeigbo 9-10) come for the assistance of other women. In *Double Yoke*, it is vivid that through the character of Miss Bulewao, the novelist defends the rights of Nko, the protagonist. Miss Bulewao, who argued with Ete Kamba, complimented Nko as a "modern African lady" and on the contrary mocks at him for not having stood up to challenge Nko, and reiterates that he has to reach the status of a "modern African man". She makes it clear that despite Ete Kamba does his studies in the University, yet he is confined by conventions and has not grown to match up to the caliber and standard of Nko. Thus, she articulates that Nko is more advanced as she is shrewd to adapt the modern trends. She opinions that Nko would be able to defend herself from the onslaught of the patriarchy, as it is

rightly said that “the modern African woman in the future is not going to accept much longer a position ascribed to her by her male counterpart” (Ohaeto 165).

Nko, as an intelligent and shrewd woman made use of all the available resources in order to win her freedom. The sexual onslaught unleashed on her did not dampen her resolve to rise high. She was tactful to transform her sexual power as a blessing in disguise to accomplish her dream. The reader must understand that Nko did not intend to have sexual pleasure from professor. However, when she had been coerced into such a situation, she had the conventional wisdom to convert the opportunity to obtain her heart’s desire. In the conversation that emerged between Nko and Professor Elder Ikot immediately after his forceful promiscuous relationship with her, he addressed Nko and said, “But you can’t go through life using your bottom to get what you want.” (141). What is astonishing is that Nko did not keep quiet to his denigrating and defamatory remark but rebutted his statement and said, “I did not believe in bottom power until today sir” (141). Having understood the importance of sexual power, Nko used it to fulfill her wish— University degree. It would be a dishonor to label her as immoral woman since she used her body to demand a degree from Professor Elder. Indeed, it would bewilder a reader to look at Nko’s superior power of intelligence with wonder, especially for emerging from misery to merriment and from victimization to a victorious position. Nko having understood the significance of intellectual efficiency said, “... It is easier to get a good degree using one’s brain power than bottom power. They may try to tell you that your bottom power is easier and surer, don’t believe them...” (155). Thus, she did not intend to achieve her ends through short cuts like offering sexual pleasure to authorities in order to win favours, but reiterated that the use of brain power and the power of intelligence was paramount for women to excel life.

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