



Research Paper

A Study Women's life and her work reflected in Buchi Emecheta novels

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Abstract: *The changing role of women has been one of the major themes in African women's fiction. This paper is an examination of five novels by Buchi Emecheta, a prominent female Nigerian novelist, and it points out the ways in which she uses the concept of work to highlight the difficulties of women's life and her status in modern Nigerian society. Emecheta claims that, while traditional notions of appropriate work for men and women have changed, women are still expected to assume roles that prevent them from attaining self-fulfillment. Here female characters show an increasing understanding of the essentially arbitrary nature of gender roles, as they seek to realize their potential as human beings and as women.*

Index Terms: *Male vs Female, Work, Identity, Gender, Labour and Social status.*

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Fiction, like any other literary genre, is created within specific social, cultural and economic contexts. With regard to Africa, the peculiar nature of the continent's historical development has caused the fiction produced by African writers to be overwhelmingly concerned with the major issues facing their societies. One such issue, which has increasingly come to the fore in recent times, is the nature of gender relationships, that is, relationships between men and women in the context of their socially defined identities. Many female writers have sought to investigate these relationships, often attempting to show how culturally-determined assumptions and preconceptions make such relationships negative and unwholesome, not just to women, who are usually depicted as being at the receiving end of these relationships, but to men as well, and to society itself. Buchi Emecheta is one of Africa's foremost female writers in this regard.

Emecheta was one of the first African women novelists to point out the various ways in which prevailing social norms and values deny women the chance to develop to their fullest potential. In novels like *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Double Yoke* (1982), she portrays female characters who heroically struggle for survival and progress in the face of enormous odds placed in their way by an obdurate male-dominated social structure or patriarchy made up of fathers, husbands, brothers, lovers and bosses.¹ This paper will examine how Emecheta uses work as a perspective from which to portray the nature of Nigerian women's identity and status in contemporary society. It will focus mainly on the ways in which work shapes and defines men and women as members of a gender and as individuals, and will highlight the tensions and conflicts that subsequently arise when the word "work" is a very inclusive term.

It incorporates household chores, unpaid tasks and wage labor carried out by people in society. Work is not necessarily synonymous with wage labor, but is, in fact, a dense conflation of various tasks encompassing multiple roles, which are often performed simultaneously. It has great economic, social and political significance in any society. From an essentially economic point of view, it enables members of society to have access to a largely acceptable, if not always legally-recognized, means of livelihood. From a social perspective, work helps to underline the individual's status as a mature and responsible (or, in the case of a child, potentially mature and responsible) member of society capable of contributing meaningfully to its advancement. Politically, the notion of work as a source of economic independence and one of the major planks to the attainment of acceptable social status makes it a veritable pillar of political relevance, underlined as it is by both economic and

social influence. In essence, work is essential to the development of any society, particularly its continued economic progress and the maintenance of healthy social relations. Indeed, the state of development of any society has often been assessed in direct proportion to the nature and type of work found in it. Thus, "primitive" or "backward" societies are those whose concepts and methods of work are perceived to be relatively unsophisticated or more dependent upon the vagaries of nature than on consciously-planned effort. Hunting and gathering societies are therefore considered less "advanced" than agricultural societies by most anthropological assessments.

At the level of the individual, work, conceived of as the regular performance of particular tasks and occupations, is of great importance to every member of society. It often determines the status of the individual by establishing a basis for his or her social, economic and political position within society. In modern societies, work is perceived essentially in terms of the jobs individuals do for a living, which are vital components of their overall identity, closely linked to their notions of who they are, how they prefer to be seen by others, and what they would like to become. Hence the coupling of professional calling and name in professions like medicine and law. The incorporation of the work one does for a living into as basic a component of personal identity as one's name is clearly demonstrative of the fundamental importance of work to identity. Work encompasses the performance of duties, the fulfillment of social expectations and the conformity to dominant social norms, as well as the creation of personal identity.

This paper will stress the notion of work as a role, that is, "a pattern of expected behaviors reinforced by socially instituted rewards and penalties" (Hartley 126). In Emecheta's novels, this multifarious characterisation of work is often evident. In *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, the main characters are women who simultaneously carry out the functions of wife, mother and breadwinner. Part of the difficulties they face lies in both the challenge of effectively performing these roles and in making the work they do reflective of their own values and aspirations.

The close relationship that exists between work and gender underlines the nature of work as a multidimensional construct. Although some scholars have argued that, in many societies, there is little basis for the division of labour by gender, it does appear that work and gender have a close relationship that is manifested in different ways in various cultures (Raza 119-29). According to Amina Mama, "to say that there is a sexual division of labour means that not only do men and women perform different kinds of work, but that their labour is also differentially valued and remunerated in accordance with the gender of the workforce performing it" (Mama 55). Many societies place restrictions on certain kinds of work as part of their determination of gender roles. Thus, in some cultures, women are not allowed to raise specific kinds of crops, rear particular kinds of animals, forge metal or enter the martial professions, and are often restricted to particular positions in the hierarchy of the dominant religion, if they are not barred from them entirely. These restrictions are often justified on religious grounds, especially the danger of ritual pollution of certain tasks or ceremonies by menstruating women. On the other hand, many societies have tasks and occupations which are almost exclusively performed by women, including child minding, housekeeping, petty trading, gardening and some craft activities. It is not surprising that work undertaken by women is often trivialized as not being "real" work, that is, not as significant as the work performed by men in the fulfilment of roles culturally defined as male (Tong 51).

As a female character in Emecheta's *Naira Power* wryly observes, "housekeeping is no work, and is only a woman's job" (Emecheta 1982b: 9). Indeed, several studies have shown that unquestioned notions of gender-appropriate tasks and occupations imprison both men and women within predetermined positions in the public and private spheres of society.³ Emecheta shows, in her fiction, how the meek acceptance of particular forms of work, especially by women, restricts their potential for self-development, straitjackets their mental outlook and conditions them to operate within the limits of oppressive social systems rather than to seek change. Work, in its broad definition, exposes the processes of what Barbara F. Reskin calls differentiation: "the practice of distinguishing categories based on some attribute [which is] a logical necessity for the differential evaluation and differential rewards" (Reskin 201). Such categories almost automatically assume the existence of a dominant group and a subordinate group corresponding to given gender roles in any society. Indeed, work is an arena where the issues of gender, race and ethnicity, and social class intersect. Gender, as a realization of the socially-constructed manifestation of inherent biological distinctions, is perhaps most clearly visible in the roles assigned to women, for those roles simultaneously justify and are justified by the cultural norms which shape definitions of what men and women should be. Race and ethnicity are also social constructs dependent on often-arbitrary perceptions of national origin and physical appearance, and, like gender, simultaneously assume and reinforce the propriety of work-related roles.

Social class also has a close relationship to work, since social prestige is near-synonymous with the esteem in which particular kinds of work are held. Together, these elements provide a complex, multidimensional perspective from which to view the position of women in Emecheta's fictional world, and to assess the nature of the various impediments and disadvantages they face as a consequence of that position.

Since work is crucial to social and individual identity, it is no surprise that it is an important sub-theme in contemporary African fiction. Work is used to delineate character, establish motivation and help create the background necessary for a thorough examination of the issues being treated. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, work is central to the image of hard-won achievement that is a dominant characteristic of the novel's main character, Okonkwo. Achebe also uses work as a device for underlining gender distinctions between men and women and, by extension, the relative importance of the former in traditional Igbo society: "[Okonkwo's] mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yam, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop" (Achebe 16). Work even becomes an element of the author's depiction of the tragedy which befalls Okonkwo, and the culture of which he is representative: Okonkwo's work ethic, centered on physical strength and traditional measures of success, is inadequate in meeting the demands of the newly-emerging world of Christianity, education and trade in Western industrial manufactures.

One of Emecheta's main aims in the novels being considered here is to show that gender does not presuppose a person's ability to successfully perform particular roles. This is most clearly demonstrated with respect to fatherhood. Several male characters like Francis in *Second-Class Citizen* and Nnaife in *The Joys of Motherhood* are sexually potent and, indeed, fierce defenders of their conjugal rights. They father children and, in this respect, do their work as husbands. However, as Emecheta points out, these men feel that their responsibilities end with the fulfilment of their sexual roles and the novels show that their failure to recognize the emotional and other roles inherent in their status as husbands and fathers means that they have not fully carried out their roles as men. The implications are profound, for they demonstrate that, just as men cannot be restricted to purely sexual roles, neither should women. Such restrictions are only too apparent in the pressure put upon women to bear male children, as if it were a process they had control over.

Emecheta's female characters are often women who initially think that the highest achievement of their lives is that of bearing children, but the consequent hardships of raising a family almost single-handedly cause them to doubt this deeply-entrenched belief. It is in the process of such self-questioning that the arbitrary nature of many gender roles is recognized. Because work is so significant in determining sex roles, it shapes perceptions of women by men, and vice versa. Thus, the qualities a "good" or "normal" woman is expected to possess often include the performance of roles deemed complementary or non-threatening to established notions of masculinity. For example, the tasks of housekeeping and child rearing assigned to women in many Nigerian cultures establish and reinforce their status as women: they are doing what is socially recognized as women's work. Many of Emecheta's female characters are, in this regard, "bad" and "abnormal" women, because they often assume ostensibly "masculine" roles in their determination to achieve particular ends. Adah is the head of a household in *In the Ditch* and the family's breadwinner in *Second-Class Citizen*; Aku-nna usurps her stepfather's right to select a future husband for her in *The Bride Price*; Adaku defiantly embarks on the life of an independent single mother in *The Joys of Motherhood*; Nko asserts her right to dispense sexual favors in *Double Yoke*. In essence, Emecheta's novels deal with female characters who find themselves in stereotyped gender roles that impose certain responsibilities and duties upon them. Some, like Adah, Aku-nna, Adaku and Nko gradually realize that these duties are in opposition to their desire to live fulfilled lives, and therein lies the fundamental conflict at the heart of most of the novels: the choice between assuming acceptable but restrictive social roles, or rebelling against them. Each choice carries its own rewards and penalties, so it is not simply a matter of choosing between good and bad. Emecheta underlines the complexity of the issues involved by setting her novels in the era between the 1940s and the 1980s, when social mores were at their most ambivalent in Nigeria.

In *Second-Class Citizen* for example, the women of Ibadan dislike Lagos because it is a city whose laws inhibit traditional modes of punishing offences, and, by implication, weaken the hold of Ibadan culture on its indigenes who live there (8). A similar situation is found in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where the strange new requirements of a colonial capitalist economy make Lagos a place "where men's flesh hung loose on their bones, where men had bellies like pregnant women, where men covered their bodies everyday" (46). The very title of *Double Yoke* is a direct reference to the twin burdens of tradition and modernity that women bear, and that crystallizes the conflicting demands that make it extremely difficult for women to be successful in modern society. The ambivalence of a culture on the threshold of momentous change puts Emecheta's characters, male and female, in an anomalous position, because there is no longer an unassailable certainty about what constitutes appropriate roles for men and women. Values that were appropriate to agrarian societies are out of place in the city, especially urban centers like Lagos, London and Calabar, where the bulk of the action takes place. On the whole, the male characters are slow to realize this fundamental social change and its implications for gender relationships. In many of the novels, men still perceive women in the age-old manner, as commodities, unimportant in their own right, passive creatures to be utilized in bringing wealth to the family, usually by means of their bride price or the production of sons. In *Second-Class Citizen*, the young Adah quickly realizes that nobody is interested in her for her own sake, "only in the money she would fetch and the housework she

could do" (9). Fathers in *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* are even more direct, naming their daughters *Aku-nna* ("father's wealth") and *Nnu-Ego* ("a great amount of money") respectively, names which are literal testimonies to their status as alienable commodities with overt material value, however much they may love them as daughters. This objectification of women is reinforced by the practice of widow inheritance, which takes place in the two aforementioned novels. In both, men inherit the wives of deceased relatives as casually as any other asset, with little regard for the feelings of the women involved.

Emecheta's female characters also believe in the dominance of traditional norms, but soon realize that things are changing in new and often-unexpected ways. Many of them accept, for example, that the husband-wife relationship cannot be what Kenneth Little calls a "companionate relationship," dependent upon the consensus of both partners, and this holds true even in cases where the wife is not socially inferior to her husband, like Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* (Little 129). They realize that men are unable to take up the responsibilities that come with being men in the traditionally accepted sense, because such notions are no longer tenable in a fast-changing Nigeria. As a female character states in *The Joys of Motherhood*: Men here are too busy being white men's servants to be men. We women mind the home. Not our husbands. Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is the money, the shining white man's money. (51)

Men are impotent, in the sense of being powerless in the face of change, and the realization of this is common to Emecheta's other novels. In *In the Ditch*, husbands and fathers are almost entirely absent in the families of *Pussy Cat Mansions*; in *Second-Class Citizen*, Francis's task is reduced to that of siring offspring, a function Adah becomes fed up with after the birth of their third child; in *The Bride Price*, *Aku-nna* shuns the "true-born" men of the community for the love of an outcast. Changing social and economic conditions deny men the ability to continue being men in the traditional sense of being heads of households, breadwinners and responsible family men. The resultant vacuum is filled by women, and, as a consequence of this, a significant opportunity emerges for them to prove their self-worth and to lead fulfilling, satisfactory and purposeful lives. What Emecheta does is to show how women rise courageously to the challenges of the time, highlighting their successes, as well as their failures. Emecheta's characters initially work assiduously in fulfilment of their traditional roles as wives, mothers and daughters, but they gradually begin to realize that they should seek to satisfy their own longings rather than only those of others.

In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah lands a well-paid job, a development which frightens her husband, who wonders if their marriage will last: "Her pay will be three times my own. My colleagues at work will laugh at me" (26-27). His fears do, in fact, have some justification. Adah's income makes her financially independent of Francis and consequently denies him the status of breadwinner so crucial to traditional notions of masculinity. However, his family is able to ensure her continued subservience by ensuring that her income is at their disposal, rather than her own: "Let her go and work for a million Americans and bring their money here, into this house" (27). Adah, in effect, works for her husband and his family, instead of for herself. In this way, the potentially liberating effect of a good job is undermined by age-old cultural dictates. Significantly, it is only in England, where the influence of such norms is considerably weaker, that she realises this truth: "The fact was that she was still laying the golden eggs stopped Francis from walking out on her. As before, her pay bound him to her, but the difference was that she now knew it" (46).

In *Double Yoke*, a male character who dreads the erosion of traditional notions of male dominance is Ete Kamba, who carefully outlines his ideal of the perfect wife: "A very quiet and submissive woman, a good cook, a good listener, a good worker, a good mother with a good education to match. But her education must be a little less than his own, otherwise they would start talking on the same level" (26). In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the central character *Nnu-Ego* comes to Lagos from rural *Ibuza* to find that the roles of wife and mother are underpinned by the role of worker: In Lagos a wife [...] had to work. She provided the food from her husband's meagre housekeeping money, but finding money for clothes, for any kinds of comforts, in some cases for the children's school fees, was on her shoulders. (52-53)

As Gareth Griffiths claims, "In Lagos, women have become economic providers too, since, in this urban world, cash rather than crops is the basis of the domestic economy" (Griffiths 302). In *Second-Class Citizen*, it is seen that there is a similar clash between the dual roles of wife and mother, and that of worker. When Adah arrives in England, she finds that she is second-class in two respects – as a black person, she is a second-class citizen; as a woman, she is a second-class human being: a second-class second class person, in effect. A major limitation of being black is that she is not supposed to have her children with her. She is therefore compelled to choose between accepting the degradation of menial employment and her children in foster care on the one hand, and marital harmony on the other. It is a dilemma she refuses to even contemplate, and the novel charts her struggle to overcome all the restrictions placed upon her as a wife, a mother and a black person.

The principal weapon at her disposal is work, specifically obtaining work suited to her qualifications and ambitions, rather than her gender and racial status. As she confronts these difficulties, her notions of work are radically changed in two important respects: first, she becomes much more aware of the relationship

between status and work – second-class citizens, she realizes, do second-class work; secondly, the peculiar nature of English society raises activities hitherto considered chores, such as child-minding, to full-time tasks. In the case of Nnu-Ego, her quick integration into the working life of a Lagos wife is so complete that “on the night she came into labour she made sure she had her eveningmarket first” (53). When her first child dies suddenly, she is full of remorse at her concentration on her business activities, which she feels caused her to neglect the baby. Like Adah, Nnu-Ego is torn between two conflicting yet essential roles, that of worker and that of mother: ... money and children don't go together: if you spent all your time making money and getting rich, the gods wouldn't give you any children; if you wanted children, you had to forget money and be content to be poor. (80)

She drastically scales down her business activities, but her husband's lack of employment and eventual conscription force her to work for the survival and progress of her family. Such is the extent of her commitment to providing for them that she seeks fulfilment not through her work, but indirectly through the children she is struggling to cater for. Like Adah, Nnu-Ego finds that her role as mother and wife imprisons her in a life of toil for others at the expense of her own well-being. Her awareness of this is expressed with the intensity of a primal scream: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?” (186). Both novels, especially *Second-Class Citizen*, thus affirm Simone de Beauvoir's belief that even the “independent” woman is “torn between her professional interests and the problems of her sexual life; it is difficult for her to strike a balance between the two; if she does, it is at the price of concessions, sacrifices, acrobatics, which require her to be in a constant state of tension” (de Beauvoir 19).

Emecheta seems to imply that a truly fulfilled woman will emerge only when women themselves become more aware of the fluid nature of gender roles in modern society. Tradition can no longer restrict women to specific duties and functions because many traditionally-approved roles are outdated and consequently irrelevant to modern requirements. Thus, a woman need not be judged by her ability to bear male children, or considered a prostitute because she seeks a life outside of marriage. But the realization of this is a painful process for Emecheta's characters. Many of them suffer the contempt of those who cannot understand their desire to become anything more than a wife and a mother. A similar yearning in American women of the 1960s has been characterized by Betty Friedan as a persistent inner voice crying, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (Friedan 67). Consequently, many of the novels have ambiguous endings. Many of these characters are seen leaving their husbands, often the worse for wear, and tormented by feelings of inadequacy and failure. For Emecheta, however, this seems to be a necessary rite of passage which women must undergo to attain self-fulfilment. As they struggle against self-doubt and oppressive cultural norms, they discover an awareness of their own potential. This is most clearly seen in Adah of *Second-Class Citizen*. Having borne five children for her husband in addition to financing his upkeep and education, she seeks fulfillment in a desire to write. For a woman caught in between the icy alienation of England and the narrow-mindedness of her husband and compatriots, writing is an attempt to give voice to silence, to establish an identity as a human being rather than merely as someone's wife or mother. She writes to “right” herself in the most fundamental sense of the word, and although little is said about the success or otherwise of her ambition, her pursuance of this strange new role in spite of more pressing duties underlines her determination to emerge as a person in her own right.

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