

**SUFFERING AND SELF-ASSERTION: BLACK WOMANHOOD IN BUCHI
EMECHETA'S DOUBLE YOKE AND KEHINDE****GNANAKUYIL K**

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ABSTRACT

Buchi Emecheta is celebrated as one of the most accomplished female literary figures in Africa. Her works mainly centre on black women and their concerns. She writes about marginalization, enslavement, loss of identity, and the position of African women in patriarchal society. In her novels *Double Yoke* (1982) and *Kehinde* (1994), she presents the clash between tradition and modernity in relation to the oppression of black women in Igbo society. *Double Yoke* narrates the story of Nko, who pursues education in modern Nigeria despite the resistance of a society that connects women's identity with traditional marriage. She struggles between traditional beliefs and modern values and asserts her identity as an individual. *Kehinde* tells the story of Kehinde, a Nigerian woman who lives with her husband Albert in London. When Albert decides to return to Nigeria, Kehinde reluctantly joins him, only to discover that he has taken a second wife. Unprepared for Nigerian social customs, she returns to London and begins to question her happiness, self-worth, and place in marriage. This study explores how Emecheta portrays the suffering, survival, and growth of black women characters in traditional and modern worlds. It also examines how Nko and Kehinde liberate themselves from patriarchal expectations and move toward self-assertion in *Double Yoke* and *Kehinde*.

KEYWORDS: Black women, African literature, tradition, modernity, empowerment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

African literature has long narrated the customs, myths, memories, and ways of life of African people. Postcolonial novels written by African writers have presented the rich history of African societies and, at the same time, the exploitation brought by colonial rule. African male writers have written about slavery, freedom, self-identity, the past and the present, race, isolation, and culture. Yet the stories of black women received less attention, and many of their experiences remained unheard in the writings of African male writers.

African literature written by black women mainly focuses on the role of women in African societies. Many novels by black women writers deal with the mistreatment of women in terms of race, gender, and cultural norms. These writers record the challenges faced by themselves and by the women around them. They show how women struggle to protect lives that have been controlled and arranged by a male-oriented and male-dominated environment.

Buchi Emecheta depicts courageous female characters who fight for survival and advancement in a world where male-dominated social structures impose severe restrictions. She highlights the many ways in which traditional conventions and ideals prevent women from realizing their abilities as individuals. Growing up in the patriarchal environment of the Igbo tribe in Nigeria, she faced cultural obstacles from a young age because of her gender. Later, after moving to London, she experienced racial, gender, and class discrimination at different stages of her life. Her novels vividly depict how slavery, culture, social oppression, traditional values, and colonialism affect the lives of black women.

Emecheta's writing throws light on the dark realities of black women's lives, which are oppressed, corrupted, and endangered by patriarchal, cultural, racial, and power structures rooted in society. Kirsten Holst Petersen comments on Emecheta's ability to recreate "the situation and difficulties of women with authenticity" and to give "valuable insight into their thoughts and feelings." Petersen further observes that Emecheta's main concern is less with cultural liberation or social change and more with giving women "access to power in the society as it exists" (Petersen, 1995).

The hardship of living as a woman in a male-dominated society itself makes life difficult. For black women, race, class, and gender discrimination push them to the edge of existence. As depicted in the novels of Buchi Emecheta, African culture often gives more importance to traditions and historical customs than to morality and human values.

Even in a modern world, society continues to create barriers that prevent women from living a normal and dignified life. The purpose of this article is to explore the suffering and challenges faced by black women characters in the novels *Kehinde* (1994) and *Double Yoke* (1982). Emecheta presents the themes of black women's survival, the contrast between tradition and modernity, self-exploration, the recovery of lost identity, and the struggle to find balance amid patriarchy, sexuality, educational freedom, and the need to stand firm as individuals.

Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* examines the paradoxes surrounding educated black women in modern Nigeria. The story takes place in the 1980s on a college campus and centres on Nko, a female student at the University of Calabar, who is forced to argue for female freedom among male students. Unlike Emecheta's other novels, where the main characters are women, *Double Yoke* is narrated through a story created by the male protagonist, Ete Kamba. The novel is presented as Ete Kamba's creative writing assignment, in which he chooses to write about his relationship with Nko.

Miss Bulewao, an empowered new woman lecturer at the university, encourages Ete Kamba to write, saying that "oneself was always a very good topic to start writing about" (*Double Yoke* 11). He aims to tell the world how things were between him and Nko before Professor Ikot entered their lives. Emecheta uses Ete Kamba to portray how a "new African man" still refuses to let go of traditional myths and beliefs that harm the women in his life.

The tension between tradition and modernity has been studied by many black writers in African literature. In *Double Yoke*, Emecheta distinguishes the two worlds and shows how both affect black women's lives. Nko finds herself in a state of disorientation as she tries to reconcile society's expectation that she conform to traditional gender roles with her desire to become an educated woman with an independent career. At the same time, Ete Kamba, her long-time boyfriend, is torn by fear and ambivalence about the changing roles of modern women. His anxiety weakens his relationship with Nko.

Emecheta succeeds in portraying her woman protagonist as strong and independent. Nko listens to her inner voice and follows her willpower in a society that expects obedience. Emecheta presents Nko as a woman caught between the two yokes of Nigerian life. Nko, who is the breadwinner of her family, wants to pursue her degree and support her family. At the same time, she wants to marry Ete Kamba according to the traditional social structure. She says, "I want to have both worlds, I want to be an academician and I want to be a quiet nice and obedient wife the type you all wanted me to be" (DY 94).

Her mother understands the painful truth that it is difficult to have both a beautiful life and this "new mad education" (DY 94). Emecheta presents the ideological conflict between the modern and traditional worlds through Nko and her mother. Even as a woman who respects traditional values, Nko becomes a victim of the patriarchal culture that sustains rigid gender expectations (Kharazi and Bahmani, 2021).

Emecheta also presents gender inequality through the male-dominated environment of Nigerian households. In such homes, the mother and children eat separately, while "the men of the house" eat at a clean table (DY 18). Emecheta represents her own voice through the character of Miss Bulewao, the new lecturer at the University of Calabar. The position of a woman with great academic achievement is something new to the male students. The narrator observes that "the unusual thing about this one was that she was outspoken" (DY 1).

The women of Nko's mother's generation seem to have found happiness within chaos and contentment within ignorance. Nko struggles between the past and the present as she attempts to become educated, capable, and successful like Miss Bulewao. Through the creative writing tasks given by Miss Bulewao, Emecheta conveys to young Nigerians and to her readers the need to manage more than one role for survival.

Nko suffers because of the traditional concept of virginity in Nigerian culture. In Nigeria, a girl is expected to be a virgin before marriage. When Ete Kamba forces himself on Nko, he expects her to bleed as proof of virginity. He later refuses to marry her because he finds no evidence that she is a virgin. He "wanted a virgin, an educated virgin, nice wholesome unspoiled for his bride when he qualified" (*Double Yoke* 54). Ete Kamba wants a modern educated wife, yet he also demands a traditional wife like his mother. Through his characterization, Emecheta shows the contradictions between modern values and traditional expectations.

Society places shame and guilt on women in the name of blind traditions and beliefs. Many women are tortured, harassed, and made to lose the willpower to live. They are expected to carry the torch for men even when their own light is fading. Nko is suppressed and made powerless in her relationship with Ete Kamba. Even when a woman is educated and holds a degree equal to that of a man, she is controlled by men, especially through traditional values. The relationship between Nko and Ete Kamba reflects the view that a woman should be controlled by a man both physically and psychologically (Bedana and Laishram, 2019).

Another painful event in Nko's pursuit of a degree is the sexual harassment she faces from her professor. The sexual exploitation of Nko by Professor Elder Ikot casts a shadow of despair over her modest existence. Yet she gathers inner strength and determination to stand up for her dignity and confront the situation.

Emecheta shows how a young girl who is ambitious and sees education as a stepping stone to success is damaged by the very institution that should protect her. Nko is exploited, betrayed, and destroyed in an

academic institution where she is supposed to gain learning and safety. Men like Professor Ikot treat women as subordinate and vulnerable in the field of education. He uses his academic authority and male privilege to exploit Nko.

Emecheta shows that Nko suffers under a chain of patriarchal oppression and is forced to seek a first-class degree for survival. She sacrifices herself for the degree and chooses to lose her dignity for the life she wants in the modern world. Emecheta shocks the reader by showing Nko's decision under the dominance of patriarchy. She decides to survive by breaking the moral rules that traditional Nigeria demands from her:

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... to Ete Kamba ... O 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. (DY 135)

Nko first experiences exploitation from her boyfriend, who represents traditional patriarchy. Later, she becomes the victim of sexual exploitation by a professor, who represents modern patriarchy. Emecheta exposes the hidden motives of powerful and educated patriarchs, especially professors, who hide their intentions behind hypocrisy. She critiques African patriarchy in both traditional social settings and modern institutions (Bedana and Laishram, 2019).

In Kehinde (1994), Emecheta shows how a woman can find a home in another country if she first finds a home within herself. Home, in this novel, becomes a state of self-recognition without being tied to a man. Kehinde Okolo is a thirty-five-year-old woman married to forty-year-old Albert Okolo. They have lived in London for eighteen years. Their two children, Joshua and Bimpe, are born and raised within the lifestyle of white society. Kehinde works as a manager in a bank and earns more than her husband. She sees herself as a settled black woman in London, a place where no one dictates how she should live or breathe under cultural restrictions.

Emecheta describes the importance of individual value, self-worth, and the ability to rise above the war that tradition and culture place on women. She does this through the characterization of Kehinde. Although Kehinde knows the privilege of living outside Nigeria, she has internalized Igbo traditions and cultural expectations. These expectations are placed upon women from birth to death. African women experience multiple forms of subjugation. Patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and gender imperialism combine to work against the African woman's self-assertion (Kolawole, 1997).

Like Ete Kamba, Albert is presented as the typical Nigerian husband who resists rules that favour his wife in a new country. Albert longs to return to Nigeria and manipulates Kehinde when he encourages her to have an abortion, especially because he expects the child to be a girl. Bodily autonomy and individual freedom remain constant concerns for Kehinde, even though she often asserts herself. Albert fails to use precautions, imposes himself on Kehinde, and then blames her for the pregnancy. Through this, Emecheta shows how power relations and patriarchal structures create a world that benefits men. Albert makes Kehinde abort the baby. Kehinde is given no real choice and does not even realize that she has the right to make decisions about her own body.

Emecheta skillfully exposes how the loss and recovery of identity are direct consequences of oppression. Kehinde internalizes the role of a dutiful Nigerian wife and places her husband's well-being above her own. She does not consider their home as hers, but as her husband's. This attitude comes from deeply rooted cultural norms. "But a good wife was not supposed to remind her husband such things. When Kehinde said 'your house', she was playing the role of the 'good' Nigerian woman" (Kehinde 4).

After the traumatic experience of abortion, Kehinde's self-awareness begins to grow. She starts to question her choices. Taiwo, Kehinde's deceased twin sister, serves as a guiding presence throughout the novel

and helps her in her search for individuality. Through her spiritual connection with her twin, Kehinde moves beyond the division within her conscious and subconscious mind.

Before discovering her self-worth and asserting her individuality, Kehinde remains unaware of the injustices she suffers in the name of marriage. Albert lives with the fear that Kehinde may gain autonomy and begin to make decisions independently in London. He knows that his control over Kehinde will weaken once she accepts self-determination and begins to think for herself. This fear reveals the power relations and patriarchal structure within their marriage. Sizemore (1996) observes that in Kehinde, Emecheta directly confronts African patriarchy through the life of Kehinde Okolo in both London and Nigeria. Kehinde represents the return of the diasporic and the postcolonial. Like Emecheta herself, Kehinde learns that marriage and homeland are not the only “places” for women.

When Kehinde leaves her job in London and returns to Nigeria, she discovers that Albert has taken another wife and has a son. She struggles within Igbo culture, where polygamy is accepted, while she has become used to monogamy in London. The emotional, mental, and physical hardships she faces help her discover her agency. In Nigeria, Kehinde is jobless, lonely, and unable to accept the polygamous household. Berrian comments that Kehinde is consciously and deliberately flexible and adaptable in her effort to redefine her identity in London. She moves beyond the idea that her existence is inseparable from her socio-historical background (Berrian, 1996).

Emecheta portrays Kehinde as a black woman who fights for the identity stolen from her by marriage. When Kehinde’s London-based friend Moriammo sends her a plane ticket to return to England, she accepts the offer. She thinks about what is good for her and what will benefit her life. Since her own family rejects her, she chooses the unknown, which seems more accommodating. In England, she secures her own place, takes ownership of her house, and enjoys the freedom of a well-paying job. This freedom empowers her to make choices that match her aspirations and well-being. Traditional society oppresses women while benefiting men, who enjoy the privilege of change without answering to the social institutions around them. Emecheta’s Kehinde acts for herself by resisting patriarchal conditioning and cultural oppression.

2. CONCLUSION

Buchi Emecheta presents two different shades of oppression and describes the position of black women under cultural and patriarchal suffering. In both modern and traditional settings, Nko and Kehinde find their truth and assert themselves against patriarchy. Emecheta shows that Nko accepts herself and her situation and frees herself from the expectations of Ete Kamba and a gender-discriminating society. Kehinde, on the other hand, courageously accepts the uncertainties before her and places faith in herself. As a result, she moves toward a more balanced and authentic sense of individual identity.

Kehinde realizes that asserting her rights does not reduce her role as a mother or her identity as a woman. Instead, it strengthens her humanity and allows her to live on her own terms. Through Nko and Kehinde, Buchi Emecheta vividly portrays the subjugation of black women in a society shaped by gender inequality, cultural hierarchy, alienation, and suffering. She exposes a cultural context that mainly serves the comfort and interests of men while placing women in positions of hardship and injustice. At the same time, Emecheta presents black women as survivors who struggle, resist, and move toward self-assertion.

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