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**Ph.D. in English Literature**

**The Subaltern Can Speak: Female Representation in**  
**Buchi Emecheta's Selected Novels**

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*To my devoted mother and the memory of my beloved father*

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is an attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of major female characters in selected novels of Buchi Emecheta, the Nigerian-British novelist, in relation to Gayatri Spivak's conviction regarding subalternity. The foundation of this research is laid on the study of eight novels: *In the Ditch*, *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Double Yoke*, *Gwendolen* and *Kehinde*. Since both the writer's and her female characters' lives are affected by colonialism, the ideas of Homi K. Bhabha, the prominent scholar in postcolonial theory, are also incorporated in the chapters to help improve the provided picture. What the researcher intends is to highlight Buchi Emecheta's counter-discourse to Spivak's claim regarding the voicelessness of the gendered subaltern. Through six chapters, the researcher initially demonstrates the subalternity of the female characters and then examines the effects of the dominant hegemonies on the lives of the female characters to show the constrictive effects of both traditional culture and modernity on the female characters as hybrid selves. Further, the main argument focuses on the way Buchi Emecheta, as a gendered subaltern, solves the problem of representation of the subaltern subject through writing novels whose materials are taken from her own life. The researcher finally claims that, being both the writer and the character, Emecheta deconstructs the dominant binary oppositions such as presence/absence, speech/writing and self/other and is able to provide the subaltern with a voice to speak. A voice, which was taken away from her when represented by the dominant discourse. Having a voice to speak, and turning from a muted subaltern to a writer, the subaltern eventually defies Gayatri Spivak's conviction regarding the inability of the subaltern to speak and being heard.

**Key Words:** Spivak, Bhabha, Emecheta, subaltern, hegemony, hybridity, stereotype, mimicry, colonialism, subjectivity

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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**



I work toward the liberation of women, but I'm not a feminist. I'm just a woman.

(Buchi Emecheta, *Feminism with a small 'f'* 553)

### **1.1. General Overview**

Colonial and Postcolonial debates along with the issues of Feminism have always been challenging discourses. The present day world with the constant cultural encounters and clashes as well as the ideas regarding pluralism and multiculturalism motivates a curiosity on the part of the onlooker to search the answer to the question of identity in today's world when there is a continuous struggle between different countries not only politically and militarily but also culturally. In this situation, the division of the world to First, Second and Third World also provides the opportunity and justifies the movements of some countries against some others while encourages different definitions for words such as tradition, modernity and civilization.

Literature is one of the areas where the unjust power relationships are usually portrayed. Colonial and Postcolonial studies, among other critical approaches, provide a suitable critical discourse to analyze this issue in literary works. Feminist discourses share many similarities with postcolonial theory and for this reason the two fields have long been associative, even complimentary; both discourses are predominantly political and concern with the struggle against oppression and injustice. Moreover, both reject the established hierarchical, patriarchal system, which is dominated by the hegemonic white male and tend intensely to deny the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority. Both women and natives are minority groups who are unfairly treated by the intrusive 'male gaze' that is the characteristic of both patriarchy and colonialism. Both people have been reduced to stereotypes and denied a separate, authentic identity by the systems that entrap them. In recent years, postcolonial studies have shown a growing interest in the problem of gender, and the ways it may affect the lives of colonial subjects. The fact that the colonial oppression affects the lives of women, both socially and economically, has motivated sensitivity in the critics and sociologists to have a different look at women exploitation, and open up a new column in postcolonial studies that includes feminist debates.

In the 1980s a series of feminist critics including Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak began to sense that Western feminism was rooted in bourgeois, euro-centric prejudice, which had to be remedied in order to avoid continued neglect of Third World Women. They were critical of regarding all women as a homogenous group without taking into account inevitable differences in ethnicity and circumstance. The undeniable reality that colonial oppression affected men and women in different ways

should be recognized as females were often subjected to what has been called a 'double colonization', whereby they were oppressed not only for their position as colonized people but also as women. This same fact, therefore, necessitates opening up a new field in feminist studies to take into account the Third World Women and their positions and problems.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among other critics in literary theory and postcolonial studies, is an unsettling voice. She has described herself as "practical deconstructionist feminist Marxist"(Harasym 97). Her earliest important work was her introduction to and translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. Almost from the start, she emphasized how deconstruction's interest in the 'violence' of traditional hierarchical binary opposition (between male and female, the West and the rest, etc.) afforded a passage from literary theory to radical politics. Spivak joined feminism's interest in silenced women to a Marxist global concern with the political, economic, and cultural oppression of Third World people. The result of this enterprise was a series of highly influential essays, which set the agenda for feminism and postcolonial theory in the 1990s. Being a critic of Western feminism, she basically focuses on Third World women, and criticized Western feminist theories' inadequacies regarding the lives of women in these countries. Indeed, one of the most important contributions of Spivak to contemporary feminist thought is her consistent demand that feminism consider the histories and the lives of Third World women and their struggles against oppression into account. In particular, Spivak challenges the universal claims of feminism to speak for all women especially the assumption that all women are the same, and emphasizes the importance of respecting differences in race, class, religion, citizenship, and culture

among women. She also furthers her arguments by presenting the idea that women are the new source of cheap labor and super-exploitation by multi-national corporations based in the Third World. By focusing on the plight of these women, Spivak has helped to redefine the critical terms and future goals of feminist politics. Spivak is also an active participant in the Subaltern Studies mainly focusing on postcolonial studies as a new attempt to liberate the Other, and to enable the Other to experience those parts of itself that fall outside what the dominant discourse has constituted as its subjecthood.

African countries have constantly been colonized by the Europeans, and as the result, they were turned to the scenes of cultural clashes. Numerous African writers paid attention to the different problems of Africans and among them some women writers have mainly focused on the plight of women. Among the best-known female authors to emerge from postcolonial Africa, Nigerian-born Buchi Emecheta is a distinguished figure for her vivid description of female subordination and conflicting cultural values in modern Africa. Emecheta's writing that are strongly autobiographical concern basically with clash of cultures and impact of Western values on African traditions and customs. The major part of her novels is related to the situation of women in a society where their role, though important, was firmly subordinate, and where the potentialities of liberation arrived with uncertain steps. What Emecheta tries to expose is the injustice of traditional, male-oriented African social customs that relegate women to a life of child-bearing, servitude and victimization, and the indifference of the newly established norms toward them. While critical of patriarchal tribal cultures, Emecheta's fiction evinces a reverence for African heritage and folklore that reflects the divided loyalties of Africans torn between the competing claims of tradition and modernity.

### 1.1.1 Biographical Information

Buchi (Florence Onye) Emecheta was born on 21 July 1944 in Yaba near Lagos, Nigeria to Jeremy Nwabudike Emecheta (a railway worker and molder) and Alice Okwuekwu Emecheta, both Igbos. She received a traditional Ibo upbringing and early witnessed tensions between indigenous African culture and urban Western values. Though schooling for girls was discouraged, young Buchi managed to receive an education at a missionary school, where she was taught English in addition to her several native languages. Bound by Ibo custom, she left school at age sixteen to marry a man to whom she had been engaged since she was eleven years old. Emecheta gave birth to their first child at the age of seventeen, and by twenty-two was the mother of five. Shortly after her marriage, she moved to London where her husband had already relocated to study.

While working at odd jobs at the British Museum library and a youth center to support her family, Emecheta devoted herself to writing in her spare time. Despite efforts by her abusive husband to undermine her literary aspirations, Emecheta eventually published several of her diary entries in *New Statesman*, later becoming the material for her first book, *In The Ditch* (1972). Written in the form of a dairy, the plot rotates around her own failed marriage and her experience of living in a mansion while trying to rear her numerous children in an atmosphere filled with poverty and racism.

She left her husband in 1966 and continued to work and write while raising her children and studying sociology at the University of London. While still in England, she completed two additional books, *Second-class Citizen* (1974) and *The Bride Brice* (1976), and then moved to the United States, where she supported herself as a social

worker in Camden, New Jersey. Upon the publication of *The Slave girl* (1977), a novel whose manuscript was once burned by her former husband, Emecheta received a Jack Campbell award from *New Statesman*, and was selected as the Best Black British writer in 1978. With the success of 1979 novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta was invited to work as a visiting professor at several American universities, and as a research fellow at the University of Calabar in Nigeria, before taking a permanent teaching position at the University of London in 1982. Emecheta's writing career to the present resulted in twelve novels as well as children stories, a number of dramas and essays. The common point of her writings for adults is mainly the plight of African women who struggle against patriarchal family structures, unfair gender stereotypes, and contradictory social values in contemporary Africa (see *Feminism in Literature* vol 5).

Emecheta's novels draw heavily upon Nigerian beliefs and postcolonial culture, and often portray the clash that occurs when the modern world encroaches upon indigenous African value systems. Many of her works are autobiographical in nature, feminist in spirit, and portray a place in which the cruelties of European colonization endure for generations. Her first two books, *In The Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*, are autobiographical accounts of her early life and marital difficulties as the fictionalized protagonist Adah follows her husband to England in search of a better future. The cultural clashes, in addition to the couple's traditional cultural heritage, results in the female protagonist's ending up living with heaps of responsibilities in raising her five little children. Concerned with the clash of cultures, in *The Bride Price: A Novel* Emecheta tells the story of a young Nigerian girl whose life is complicated by traditional attitudes toward women. The young girl's father dies when she is thirteen;

with her brother and mother, she becomes the property of her father's ambitious brother. She is permitted to remain in school only because it will increase her value as a potential wife. However, she falls in love with her teacher, a descendant of slaves, and because of familial objections, they elope, thereby depriving her uncle of the "bride price". When she dies in childbirth, she fulfills the superstition that a woman would not survive the birth of her first child if her bride price had not been paid. *The Slave Girl* similarly depicts the limited opportunities and the property status of women in Nigerian society. A poor, gently raised Ibo girl is sold into slavery to a rich African market woman by her brother at the turn of the century. Educated by missionaries, she joins the new church where she meets the man she eventually marries. The book also provides a remarkable picture of Christianity's impact on traditional Ibo society. Perceiving parallels between marriage and slavery, Emecheta explores the issue of freedom within marriage in a society where slavery is supposed to have been abolished. *The Joys of Motherhood* describes the circumscribed existence of protagonist Nnu Ego, a dutiful Nigerian wife and mother who suffers poverty and humiliation in a traditional polygamous marriage. Rejected by her first husband for failing to produce a child, Nnu Ego subsequently marries Nnaife, a cruel city man she finds unattractive but resigns herself to, and eventually bears several children. Exhausted by years of servitude and domestic conflict with her co-wife, Adaku, Nnu Ego finally returns to her village and dies alone and unappreciated for her sacrifices, reflected in the novel's ironic title. *Destination Biafra* is a sweeping historical novel about civil unrest in Nigeria during the Biafran secessionist movement of the late 1960s. In *Double Yoke* Emecheta relates the disillusioning experiences of a female college student, Nko, whose personal

relationships and educational goals are compromised by sexual politics on a Nigerian campus. Nko is scorned by her boyfriend for permitting premarital sex with him, and then seduced by a manipulative professor with whom she becomes pregnant. The title refers to Nko's double bind as she realizes her equally degrading choice between prostitution as a traditional wife or as a liberated academic woman. In 1984, Emecheta decides to write a full-length autobiography to provide the detailed background for facts depicted in her two autobiographical novels and the result is *Head above Water*.

In *The Rape of Shavi* Emecheta presents an allegorical interpretation of European imperialism in Africa. The story relates the disposition of the mythical Shavians, an idyllic tribe of African cattle farmers who are uncorrupted by contact with the West until a plane piloted by Englishmen crash-lands among them. The white men abuse their trust, exploit their natural resources, and introduce guns and greed to their society, leaving the Shavians devastated by war, draught and famine. *Gwendolen* or *The Family*, the title with which the novel appeared in the States, chronicles the life of the title character, a young Jamaican girl, whose parents move to England in search of a better life, leaving her in the care of her grandmother. Her grandmother's boyfriend molests her, and when she eventually rejoins her parents in England, her own father rapes her. Despite these troubles, and her father's suicide, she eventually finds happiness. *Kehinde* involves a middle-aged Nigerian woman who relinquishes a professional career in England to return to her native land with her husband. Arriving in Nigeria, she discovers that her husband has taken a second wife, reducing her to insignificance despite her status as an educated woman and senior wife. Her crucial

decision to choose her London residence as her real home she flies back to England to try to defy the factors, which intend to destroy her self-reliance and authenticity.

### **1.1.2 Buchi Emecheta and African Traditional Society**

Buchi Emecheta's literary terrain is the domestic experience of the female characters, and the way in which these characters try to turn the table against the second-class and slavish status to which they are subjected either by their husbands or by the male-oriented traditions. Reading Buchi Emecheta informs us of the ways fiction, especially women's writing, plays a role in constructing a world in which women can live complete lives; a world that may provide women with opportunities for freedom, creativity, self-expression, friendship, and love. Welesley Brown Lloyd believes that, "of all women writers in contemporary African literature Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct feminist protest" (35).

Buchi Emecheta's major concern is providing a picture of the African women, which is nothing to smile about. Providing the readers with the picture taken mostly from her own life, she articulates the oppression, predicament and uncertainty prevailing in the lives of African women whom she refers to as "peasant women" (Uraizee xi). Besides providing a picture of the traditional African woman, Emecheta also has a keen eye in her realistic treatment of women after the country's colonization. She shows that the identity of the postcolonial woman is fluid and displaces itself in various positions on a constantly evolving continuum. What prevails in Emecheta's Oeuvre is generally an intense anger at the sexual discrimination at the core of the

culture of her people and a concomitant contempt for the men who perpetrate it.

Comparing Emecheta with Sahgal and Gordimer, Joya Uraizee says about her:

In her writing female identity is a product of the ideological history that surrounds it, she describes female subjectivity in terms of fragmentation, displacement, and marginality. Writers like Emecheta, Sahgal, and Gordimer are themselves somewhat displaced from the mainstream cultures they are writing about because of their own class-based, racial, or expatriate identities. (xii)

Emecheta's first novels which are set in Nigeria, *The Salve Girl*, *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* work like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they are portraits of "female bondage" (Frank 749), describing African women in their total submergence and enslavement. On the other, they depict the structures and institutions, which empower women and increase their participation in the sociopolitical, economic and spiritual activities in their community. In these three novels, she gives a picture of women in contemporary society as well as those in the past. The realistic picture provided by the writer destroys women's contentment with the present state of affairs while giving insights into the strategies that enable women to survive the oppressions of patriarchal society. Two types of women are presented in these novels: those that concede to oppression and domination of the patriarchal society, and those who try hard to exploit the existing institutions of their society for their best. It is mainly in these three novels that the writer intends to show the positive possibilities offered to women in the traditional African society, which helps them have some degrees of authenticity

and remind the readers of colonialism's responsibilities in depriving women of these rights and aggravating their subjugation as the result.

In an Igbo society, there are institutions that provide women with power and a means to exercise their free will and special aspects of their individuality in the male-dominated community. The institutions, which provide the Igbo women with power, are like age-group associations, the association of wives of a particular lineage, and the solidarity that daughters- especially those married ones-enjoy in their natal family or their extended family. The economic structure of the traditional society was favorable to women in spite of the limitations. Women in their traditional society strive toward economic independence from their childhood. Despite restrictions imposed on women, there were women communities, which help them exploit their limited rights to the fullest. The young girls enjoy the company of their age-mates with whom they are allowed to go on far-distant trips, have trade groups in the market places, and take part in small singing, dancing societies. The importance of the age-groups is the manner in which it creates and fosters friendship among young girls and prepares them for future responsibly. In *The Slave Girl*, when Ojebeta returns home from slavery in Ma Palagada's mansion, the first thing she does is seeking out her age-group. In this way, she is not left alone in the society of which she has not been a member for a long time.

Another constructive aspect that traditional society provides for women is the right of trading. In Emecheta's novels, economic independence is one of the basic requirements for women's lives. Characters like Ma Palagada and Ma Mee are merchant queens that control the market. Having economic independence, in a patriarchal social order helps them to be more confident and influential in their family and more respected

in the community. In their first steps toward solidarity and self-respect, Emecheta's characters always strive toward economic independence. It is the economic independence, which magnifies their power and thus helps them in their way toward self-respect.

The other positive point regarding women in the Igbo traditional society is the way they exercise their power in their natal homes. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego returns home after her first childless marriage and is welcomed by father warmly. Ojebeta of *The Slave Girl* enjoys the same respect when she comes back home from years of slavery. Women in the traditional society are of inferior rank but they try to take advantage of their limited power to the fullest to protect their rights. Indeed, for these women survival is the keystone of their life's experience in patriarchy.

Women's roles after colonization underwent a drastic change. The colonizers cherished the idea of subservient Christian wives at the cost of the active traditional African woman. As a consequence, African women often suffer from double oppressive structures-the Igbo traditional patriarchal standards and the alien patriarchal system introduced by the white men after colonization. Survival in this new society required new strategies. Juliana Makuchi in *Gender in African Women's Writing* says, "Emecheta shows in her writing how when women are displaced out of the rural areas where the sexual division of labor grants women certain roles and autonomy and move to urban areas where flexible gender system is almost non-existent, women often find themselves in a disadvantaged position compared with their men" (23).

Colonization of Africa was also equal to total emasculation of African man who occupied a highly positive situation in the traditional society too. The imposition of the

alien culture caused the position of highly reverend male to change to subservience and impotence and the consequence was disastrous for the traditional culture. The emasculation of the Igbo man caused him to turn his anger toward women to prove the power he has already been stripped off by the colonial masters. The loss of masculine power in colonial Nigeria is a theme Emecheta explored in *The Joys of Motherhood* with the creation of Nnaife and the response his women show toward him.

The colonial set-up also stripped women of their traditional privileges, which they took for granted in their traditional society. Migrating to the towns makes African women lonesome and there is no company to rely on in distress. The clash between the traditional world and the modern colonial one is a major source of distress for women in Africa. The traditional privileges are no longer useable in colonial worlds. This same point is Nnu Ego's major cause of suffering. She is one of the victims of this conflict. Taken away from her traditional upbringing, she is unable to cherish the new values prompted by the colonial world. She is finally the victim of those values, which her children do not support.

Another possibility that the traditional society bestowed on women was the position of the storyteller. In her narrative style, Buchi Emecheta is clearly under the influence of these storytellers. The stories that are called Ifo denote an Igbo oral genre exploited by women in traditional Igbo societies. In *Head above Water* she says: "instead of using the moonlight and her own emotional language as her tools, I have to use electricity, a typewriter, and a language that belonged to those who once colonized the country of my birth" (242).