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The Joys of Motherhood could be considered as one of the forebears of feminist issues on reproductive justice and culture within the rich Nigerian literary tradition.Awoman is more than her womb. This is the lesson that Buchi Emechetas novel The Joys of Motherhood impressed on me when I first encountered it in my second year of secondary school. A simple idea then and now, yet it remains charged with socio-political tension both in Nigeria as well as in the diaspora. Especially as conversations about reproductive justice and the states role in controlling womens reproductive capacities continues to become polarized and politicized on numerous stages.It has been more than four decades since the publication of Emechetas novel yet the issues it attends to are far from resolved. In 1979, when The Joys of Motherhood was released, second-wave feminism which had largely centred the voices and perspectives of middle-class White women was coming to an end. Meanwhile, what we might refer to as Nigerian feminism today, was burgeoning with the establishment of the political group, Women in Nigeria, in 1983, four years after the publication of Emechetas fifth novel. The Joys of Motherhood could be considered as one of the forebears of feminist issues on reproductive justice and culture within the rich Nigerian literary tradition. On par with Flora Nwapas 1966 Efuru.However, it is worth noting that Buchi Emecheta might have disagreed with the feminist label while more strongly identifying with Black womanism as described by Alice Walkerespecially given Walkers nuanced work on race and class. Nonetheless, Emechetas oeuvre serves as a foundation for what many Nigerians practice and understand today as feminism. This necessitates reading the Joys of Motherhood as a precursor to contemporary Nigerian feminist texts.What joys in motherhood? Though Emechetas text is titled The Joys of Motherhood, the story is about anything but. There is little doubt that Emecheta intended the title of her text to be sardonic and mocking. Nnu Ego fervently desires children and dedicates most of her life to having and raising her children. Unfortunately, in the end, Nnu Ego dies alone and is scorned by her village for not being content with the knowledge that her children were successful. Despite having multiple children who become successful professionally due to her sacrifices, they only return after her death to throw her a grand funeral. She never truly experiences the joys promised to her.In a reflection following her death in 2017, Emechetas son, Sylvester Onwordi notes that his mother always preferred the life of the family and many scholars have noted that Emechetas feminist critique is complicated by the central role of family in African cultures. Emechetas text is pointedly critical of how the Nigerian society promises a utopic ideal in motherhood. Then and now, childbirth can be viewed as a culturally controlled activity that is inextricably linked with nationalistic goals when analysed on a macro level. For instance, Nigerias four-child policy in 1988 as a means of population controla decision it took in conjunction with a major pillar of the World Banks neoliberal structural adjustment programmeis a good example of the states role in dictating womens reproductive choices.In a world rife with materialism due to widespread capitalism, the power dynamics of reproductive agency are influenced by questions of what is profitable, and what has economic value. Consider the situation in China, where the one-child policy was rolled back to two children and is now being rolled back to three given the positive impact of a more youthful population on the economy. Collectively, these show how regulation of womens reproductive capacities exists within capitalist structures.The Joys of Motherhood and its successorsHistorically and culturally, having large family units were seen as beneficial in agrarian societies for the effective tilling and cultivation of huge swaths of lands (although this view is contested today). This belief is exemplified in The Joys of Motherhood as Nnu Egos first husband, Amatokwu, remarries quickly when Nnu Ego is unable to conceive, moving her to another hut for older (read: menopausal and thus unable to give birth) wives, and enlists her in farm work to manifest some other economic value since she cannot produce children to aid in the farm activities. Women producing heirs and necessary labour was considered crucial in such times to generate wealth. Hence, giving context to a cultural order that was created through economic motivations. The more children in a family unit, the more work could be done and, the more productive that family, the better off the community to which they belonged. Hence, the link between reproduction and communal imperatives. In such communities, putting motherhood on a pedestal, could be said to provide a manufactured incentive for women to undergo the challenging process of childbirth and the ensuing lifelong commitment to raising children who can perform labour, thus ensuring economic viability in the long run. This is not to suggest, that childbearing and/or rearing only occurs in response to materialist principles, but that on a societal scale, culture and beliefs around reproduction are often shaped by these principles.Despite our pretences to the contrary, Nigeria in the modern era is no different. Miscarriages and stillborn children are still considered a taboo as well. What will people think is silently whispered in Church about women who lose their babies to such health complications. The pity towards such women is apparent and thick with condescension. The popular elementary school song declares that motherhood is precious and unaffordable, however, the reality laid bare in texts like Emechetas The Joys of Motherhood show how stifling and constrictive it can be instead.With that in mind, the parallels between Emechetas Nnu Ego, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichies Olanna in Half of a Yellow Sun, Lola Shoneyins Bolanle in The Secret Lives of Baba Segis Wives, and Ayobami Adebayos Yejide in Stay With Me are striking. These women, like Nnu Ego, had to negotiate their place in a society that had cultural expectations of fertility while struggling to conceive. Yet, what is perhaps most striking is that despite the variance in settings (historical and geographical), these characters have a shared experience. The same issues Emecheta wrote on in 1979 with Nnu Ego, are still being contended within more recent texts such as the 2006 Half of a Yellow Sun, the 2010 The Secret Lives of Baba Segis Wives, and the 2017 Stay With Me. A poignant scene in Adichies Half of a Yellow Sun that helps underscore this is Olannas encounter with the mother (Mama) of Odenigboho accuses her of being a witch because she allegedly did not suck her mothers breasts a scene made more harrowing when an impassioned Onyeka Onwenu delivers it to a visibly shocked Thandiwe Newton in the film adaptation. The implication here is that Olanna is unnatural and unfit to raise Mamas grandchildren because she was not nursed by her motherthat is, how can Olanna be a mother when her own mother was not an adequate mother to her? It is following this that Olanna and Odenigbo decide to start trying for a child, her failure to conceive making her feel something might be wrong with her body.Comparably, in The Secret Lives of Baba Segis Wives, Baba Segi, Bolanles husband, tells Bolanle: your barrenness brings shame upon me, before agreeing to see a doctor to resolve what he views as an ultimate failing in their partnership. Bolanle is also made to feel that there is something wrong with her, a suggestion that takes root due to unresolved trauma. She, too, becomes engaged in a (largely unwarranted and coerced) struggle with her body. In Stay with Me, Yejides meddling in-laws take matters of her inability to conceive into their hands by making her husband marry another woman. Yejide, who openly spoke about her inability to have children, becomes shocked by her in-laws aggressive approach. Then there is Nnu Ego in The Joys of Motherhood, a character whose struggles foreshadow, and begin the conversation for these later fictional successors. The women are ethnically different with none inhabiting the same setting; yet they mirror each others experiences and share the same cultural context.Problematizing reproductive agency in NigeriaIn the foregoing texts, the women are keen to fulfil their prescribed reproductive duties, and everything around steers them towards that promised ultimate destiny through which they ought to self-actualize. When they struggle to conceive, that failing tattoos shame across their psyche, making them question their bodies. Their personhood seems to be premised on their ability to give birth. The expectation of women to aspire to the joys of motherhood is the conventional wisdom that is embedded within our cultures; hence a child is the currency that secures a womans place in her in-laws home. In a shared cultural context where family comes first, this is rarely seen as a burden.There is also a religious component to these patriarchal expectations as religious texts are sometimes misinterpreted to suggest a forced responsibility of childbirth, which often exists to maintain an oppressive power dynamic. The interplay of religion, culture and reproductive agency in Nigeria is nuanced and not a binary situation of powerful male clergy versus hapless and oppressed women. Spirituality or religion in Nigeria is a superstructure within which struggles around reproductive agency occur, and childbirth is not beyond the average Nigerians tendency to rely on spiritual aid to solve problems. Take the innumerable prayer programs for fruit of the womb where people congregate in large numbers in search of clergy who can bestow divine fertility. We see this reflected as Nnu Ego desperately seeks aid from dibia (spiritual figures in her Igbo culture) about interceding with her chi. A scene that is in conversation with Adebayos in Stay With Me as Yejide dances with a swaddled goat on a mountain summit at the request of Prophet Josiah in the hope that she may conceive. This is despite the fact that both novels were written with almost four decades apart and located in different settings: Nnu Ego finds herself moving between rural South East Nigeria and Lagos in 1930s and 1940s (The Joys of Motherhood), while Yejides struggles occur against the background of Ilesa post-1985 (Stay With Me). Yet, the desperation is similar. The enduring circumstances point not just to a shared cultural context, but also a structural failing that continues to impede on womens reproductive agency. The fact that Yejides story is still so resonant today, 40 years after Nnu Ego was introduced shows that despite how far we have come with regards to womens rights, reproductive agency is largely still held captive by a patriarchal society.As a man reading these texts, the actions and emotions underpinning the fervent (and in many ways culturally manufactured) desire to be a mother is alien to me. Even as I struggle to understand the failures of the male characters to meaningfully empathize with the protagonists of these novels, I am reflective of my own privilege as to never having to weigh the well-documented risks of childbirth to my health and body. More to the point, I am appalled at the husbands/partners actions in all texts, but at the same time, I am forced to ponder upon my complicity with the conditions that enable these cultural practices. Nevertheless, Emechetas work and the books that follow in that legacy serve as an important intervention with regards to my own ethical grappling with my positionality in relation to such discourses. I will never know truly what it feels to have my personhood reduced to a part of my body, but these texts enable me to start critiquing my own politics and socialization. I often echo Angela Davis in saying it is not enough to not be racist, one must be anti-racist. Yet do I apply the same principle towards challenging patriarchy and misogyny? How about a commitment to being anti-misogynist, and what does such an ethical and political theory look like? These are the questions I find myself returning to as I engage with these texts and come face to face with a culture that denies reproductive agency.Moving towards feminist autonomy In the Western world, the debate about reproductive justice almost always hinges on the pro-choice/pro-birth polemic. A frame that does very little to address many of the underlying issues around reproductive justice and tends to be employed cynically in negative partisanship strategies to provoke outage on both sides of the aisle. In Nigeria, we are too socially conservative (or at least so it appears) to have such a polarized discourse occupy the public consciousness. Resistance comes in other forms instead. To borrow from Franny Chois timely poem The World Keeps Ending, and the World Goes On, our coat-hanger apocalypse occurs out of sight for fear of stigmatization. Yet we all hear the stories. Beyond this, however, motherhood is the pinnacle, the ultimate prize none should deny. However, in elevating motherhood to a mandatory aspiration that all women are coerced into striving towards, can reproductive agency still be said to exist? And what does such a culture say about our ethical prerogatives? Motherhood can be a blessed state when chosen freely and adequately supported. Though this is often a choice that is complicated by the socialization of gender roles, and political imperatives in a global society upheld by numerous coercive and oppressive systems such as capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism and racism. In actuality, autonomy is a fraught and contested concept that is constantly negotiated amid numerous external pressures. Nonetheless, the decision to become a mother can be immensely rewarding and fulfilling when it is made as freely and independently as possible. But when motherhood becomes the entirety of a womans worth, that blessing begins to look like a cage.In centring reproductive capacity above all else as the key metric of a womans worth, the patriarchy is still as much at work as it is in the more topical womens issues such as domestic violence, sexual violence, and access to healthcare. While womens bodies continue to be appropriated as sites for systemic violence, the strategies for exercising domination and control are ever-changing. Globally few texts are cited more often than Margaret Atwoods dystopian The Handmaids Tale for shining a spotlight on the politics at play in reproductive issues and control of womens bodies. Buchi Emecheta however, accomplishes this half a decade earlier and locates it within a tradition of modern African feminist writing. We have never had to speculate about our trajectory to a world in which women are often reduced to their wombs. That world is already here, has been here for quite a while.All four booksthe Joys of Motherhood, Half of a Yellow Sun, The Secret Lives of Baba Segis Wives and Stay with Mepresent distressing accounts of the issues surrounding female reproductive justice, rights and agency in Nigeria through fiction. The authors make dramatic choices that hold our collective feet to the fire. Nnu Ego, Olanna, Bolanle, and Yejide are not unfamiliar to us. We know these women. They are our sisters, our aunts, our friends, our mothers. For some of us, they remind us of ourselves. We know their stories, yet by encountering them on the page their private anguish becomes more palpable and authentic. We understand better how ruinous these circumstances can be. The goal being of course that we do not just read, discuss, and move on. By telling us these stories, the authors point not just to the problems, but also to possible places from which to start dismantling these inequities. There is something striking in the way Emecheta resolves her novel; Nnu Ego resolutely refuses to grant the prayers of her descendants seeking children of their own. She gets her last laugh instead in her death, becoming a powerful subversive symbol that says instead the buck stops here, no more of this rubbish. Look, Buchi Emecheta, is saying here. Look at what else women can be, look at what else we always have beenThe views, thoughts, and opinions published inThe Republicbelong solely to the author and are not necessarily the views ofThe Republic or its editors. We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editors by writing to editors@republic.com.ng. We see here the contrast in the ideal woman before colonialism a proud, sarcastic woman who could deal with male arrogance and the ideal woman after Christianity came a timid, quiet woman. views updated May 23 2018WriterTough Times in LondonThe Sorrows of One MotherAnother View of PolygamyPortraits of the Dispossessed ExtolledSelected writingsSourcesNigerian-born novelist Buchi Emecheta was considered one of her countrys most distinguished literary names, though she moved to England in the early 1960s. Emechetas novels draw heavily upon Nigerian beliefs and post-colonial 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. Emecheta described her novels as stories of the world, but from a female perspective, as she told Essence writer Elsie B. Washington These women face the universal problems of poverty and oppression, and the longer they stay, no matter where they have come from originally, the more the problems become identical.Emecheta was born in 1944 in Yaba, near the large city of Lagos, and was of Ibo heritage. The Ibo are one of Nigerias main ethnic groups; they, the Hausa, and Yoruba groups created highly developed city-states and even empires before the Europeans arrived to conduct a thriving slave trade in the fifteenth century. Nigeria was under British rule from 1906 until 1960. As with her future fictional characters, the destiny of Emechetas parents was shaped by this colonial economy: both were educated by missionaries and joined the Church Missionary Society and moved to the city to find work. Though her father worked for the railway, the spiritual home of the family remained the village of Ibuza, and as a young girl Emecheta traveled back there oftenduring the rains, to help on the farm and to learn our ways, she recalled in a paper delivered before the Second African Writers Conference and published in 1988s Criticism and Ideology. Her parents were determined to instill a degree of traditional Ibo values in her, she noted. If I lived in Lagos I could start to have loose morals and speak Yoruba all the time.Emecheta was close to her aunt, who was the oldest woman in the family, and in Ibo culture such females hold a place of respect as Big Mother. During Emechetas childhood, her Big Mother, quite old and nearly blind, told fantastic stories of the familys Ibo ancestors. We would sit for hours at her feet mesmerized by her trance-like voice, Emecheta recalled in Criticism and Ideology. Through such stories she could tell the heroic deeds of her ancestors, all our mores and all our customs. She used to tell them in such a way, in such a sing-song way that until I was about fourteen I used to think that these women were inspired by some spirits.Tough Times in LondonIn 1962, when she was just eighteen, Emecheta moved to London with her new husband. Though her English language skills were still lacking, she was determined to improve them and begin writing. The birth of five children kept her from pursuing that goal for a time, and her husbands lack of ambition forced her to work outside the home. She found a job in the library of the British Museum in 1965 and later became a youth worker with London Education Authority. In her spare time, Emecheta wrote, but her husband resented herAt a GlanceBorn July 21, 1944, in Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria; daughter of Jeremy Nwabudike (a railway worker and molder) and Alice Ogbanje (Okwuekwu) Emecheta; married Sylvester Onwordi, 1960 (separated, 1966); children: Florence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy, Alice. Education: University of London, B.Sc. (with honors), 1972. Religion: Anglican.Career: British Museum, London, England, library officer, 1965-69; Inner London Education Authority, London, youth worker and sociologist, 1969-76; community worker, Camden, NJ, 1976-78; Writer and lecturer, 1972-. Visiting professor at several universities throughout the United States, including Pennsylvania State University, University of California, Los Angeles, and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1979; senior resident fellow and visiting professor of English, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 1980-81; lecturer, Yale University, 1982, London University, 1982-; fellow, London University, 1986. Proprietor, Ogwugwu Afor Publishing Company, 1982-83. Member of Home Secretarys Advisory Council on Race, 1979-, and of Arts Council of Great Britain, 1982-83.Awards: Jock Campbell Award for literature by new or unregarded talent from Africa or the Caribbean, New Statesman, 1978; selected as the Best Black British Writer, 1978, and one of the Best British Young Writers, 1983.Addresses: 7 Briston Grove, Crouch End, London N8 9EX, England.literary aims, and he burned her first manuscript. By 1966, her marriage had disintegrated and she realized that writing might provide a more stable income for her and her children. I thought I would wait to be as old as Big Mother with a string of degrees before writing, she noted in Criticism and Ideology. But I had to earn my living and the only thing I could do was write. She enrolled at the University of London, earned a degree in sociology, and began writing a column about the African/London experience for the New Statesman in 1972. Her essays about the culture shock she experienced, her failing marriage, racism in London, and her struggles as a working mother of five and were collected into her first book, In the Ditch.Emechetas first novel was Second-Class Citizen, published in 1974. Here she drew from an earlier period in her life, when her husband was in graduate school but indifferent to his studies and abusive toward her. The Bride Price, her second published novel, was actually written in the 1960s. The first of her works to be set in Nigeria, it centers upon a young woman struggling with the cultural traditions that restrict her life in a most cruel way: her father dies when she is thirteen, and her uncle literally inherits her. She is allowed to continue her education but only because it will increase her bride price, the sum her uncle will receive for contracting her marriage. She falls in love with a teacher, a man from a less exalted family, and elopes with him. A Nigerian superstition warns that such a woman will die in childbirth, and the heroine fulfills this prophecy at the close of The Bride Price.The Sorrows of One MotherEmecheta lived in Camden, New Jersey, for a time and supported herself as a community worker there in the mid-1970s. She continued to write, and her works from this period include Slave Girl and The Joys of Motherhood. This latter work, published in 1979 with a title designed to convey irony, is typical of Emechetas fiction. Young Nnu Ego, from the village of Ibuza, returns to her family home in shame when she does not conceive a child as a new bride. Her father then sends her away to marry a man in Lagos, named Nnaife, and Nnu Ego detests him at first sight. Nnaife has a lowly job as a laundry worker for a white family, and Nnu Ego views him with a contempt she extends to Nigerian men in general. Men here are too busy being white mens servants to be men, she thinks. Nnu Ego becomes pregnant but at first gives birth only to girls considered valueless offspring in Nigerian culture. Finally, she has a son, but he dies before he is a month old, and Nnu Ego descends into grief over him and her situation. She tries to kill herself, and a crowd gathers near the bridge to watcha thing like that is not permitted in Nigeria, you are simply not allowed to commit suicide in peace, the novel states, because everyone is responsible for the other person.More prosperous times eventually arrive for Nnu Ego and her eight children, especially when her husband finds a better job, but when her brother-in-law dies, Nnaife inherits his four wives, and one comes to live with his and Nnu Egos family. Tensions in the household increase, and here Emecheta shows the ways in which Nigerian traditions clash with the realities of modern life. A man like Nnaife cannot earn enough in a city to support such customs, but in Ibuza such a polygamous lifestyle is possible, for each wife has her own small household. In the end, their family falls apart, and the imposition of Western ways and a foreign economic system destroys Ibo traditions that once ensured stability and continuity. Male children, for instance, are expected to care for elderly parents, butNnu Egos sons will not do so for her. Educated in British schools, one emigrates to Canada, while the other rejects his Ibo heritage and fully adopts the European belief in economic self-sufficiency. Nnu Ego dies by the road side, alone. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her, the novel concludes.Another View of PolygamyEmecheta, though a committed feminist, does not view polygamy as a negative system. In many cases polygamy can be liberating to the woman, rather than inhibiting her, especially if she is educated, she told the audience assembled at the Second African Writers Conference. The husband has no reason for stopping her from attending international conferences like this one, from going back to university and updating her career or even getting another degree. Polygamy encourages her to value herself as a person and look outside her family for friends.Another work that added to Emechetas literary reputation was 1982s Double Yoke, the story of two young Nigerians who meet while university students. Ete Kamba and Nko are eager to experience life away from their families for the first time, and fall in love. They engage in premarital relations, but Ete Kamba is more conservative than Nko and comes to resent her assertive mind and desire for independence. They separate, and then her professor attempts to seduce her. The novel is both comic and tragic in its depiction of Nkos and Ete Kambas youthful, emotional extravagances and the campus response to their transgressions, noted Jewelle Gomez in a Black Scholar review of Double Yoke, Here, as in Emechetas other novels, she speaks with an undeniably Nigerian voice; makes clear the Nigerian womans circumscribed position in society and her skillful adaptation to it.Portraits of the Dispossessed ExtolledEmechetas novels have earned critical accolades from the literary establishment. Emecheta is no ideologue, remarked New York Times Book Review critic Reginald McKnight, her characters do not utter or think words that would not come from them; they are not mere representatives of larger social movements but real, complex human beings, shaped by the vicissitudes of class, culture and sexual politics. She raises the right questions, but never harangues. She writes with subtlety, power and abundant compassion.Other novels from Emecheta include Adahs Story, The Moonlight Bride, and The Family. In The Rape of Shavi, first published in 1983, a plane crash in rural Africa is welcomed by tribespeople there, but the foreigners steal some valuable minerals and repair their plane just before the local chief forces them to wed; his heir stows away on the plane with the Britons. Emecheta also wrote an autobiography, Head above Water, and a 1990 novel that delves into the colonial experience in the Caribbean. The title character in Gwendolen is just eight years old when the novel opens and lives in Granville, Jamaica. Gwendolen remains with family members when her parents emigrate to Englandreferred to as Molder Kontrybut is traumatized when her grandmothers boyfriend sexually assaults her. Eventually she joins her parents in London, and her father also abuses her. The work, written in Jamaican patois, also chronicles her deep humiliation at school because of her language skills. McKnight, writing in the New York Times Book Review, called it a rich, complex and fast-moving novel.Emechetas 1994 novel, Kehinde, depicts the ongoing conflict for Africans living abroad. Kehinde Okolo is a 35-year-old Londoner of Nigerian descent with a management position in international banking. She is also married with two children, but her husbands small business does not satisfy him, and he wishes to return home. In his village, he is likely to become chief, and in the end, Kehinde agrees to the plan but stays in London for a time to sell their home. When she arrives in Nigeria, she finds that her husband has taken another wife, with whom he now has two new children. In the village, Kehinde has no status her position in the family is eclipsed by her husbands sisters and finds herself increasingly troubled by circumstances that surrounded her birth. She was a twin, but the other was stillborn, and their mother died in childbirth; Kehinde suffers from the belief that she was responsible.Emecheta returned to Nigeria frequently and to her family in Ibuza. In addition to pursuing her creative work, she held numerous academic posts including stints at Yale and London universities. For a time in the early 1980s she ran a publishing company called Ogwugwu Afor; as of 1979 she was a member of the Britains Advisory Council on Race. I am simply doing what my Big Mother was doing for free about thirty years ago, she said of her career as a novelist in the Criticism and Ideology paper. The only difference is that she told her stories in the moonlight, while I have to bang away at a typewriter I picked up from Woolworths in London.Selected writingsIn the Ditch, Barrie & Jenkins, 1972.Second-Class Citizen (novel), Allison & Busby, 1974, Braziller, 1975.The Bride Price: A Novel (paperback published as The Bride Price: Young Ibo Girls Love; Conflict of Family and Tradition), Braziller, 1976.The Slave Girl: A Novel, Braziller, 1977.The Joys of Motherhood: A Novel, Braziller, 1979.Titch the Cat (for children; based on story by daughter, Alice Emecheta), Allison & Busby, 1979.Nowhere to Play (for children; based on story by daughter, Christy Emecheta), Schocken, 1980.The Moonlight Bride (for children), Oxford University Press in association with University Press, 1981.The Wrestling Match (for children), Oxford University Press in association with University Press, 1981, Braziller, 1983.Destination Biafra: A Novel, Schocken, 1982.Naira Power (novelette directed principally to Nigerian readers), Macmillan (London), 1982.Double Yoke (novel), Schocken, 1982.The Rape of Shavi (novel), Ogwugwu Afor, 1983, Braziller, 1985.Adahs Story: A Novel, Allison & Busby, 1983.The Moonlight Bride, G. 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Religion: Anglican Hobbies and other interests: Gardening, attending the theatre, listening to music, reading.ADDRESSES: Home7 Briston Grove, Crouch End, London N8 9EX, England.CAREER: British Museum, London, England, library officer, 196569; Inner London Education Authority, London, youth worker and sociologist, 196976; com-munity worker, Camden, NJ, 197678. Writer and lecturer, 1972. Visiting professor at several universities throughout the United States, including Pennsylvania State University, University of CaliforniaLos Angeles, and University of IllinoisUrbana-Champaign, 1979; senior resident fellow and visiting professor of English, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 198081; lecturer, Yale University, 1982, London University, 1982; fellow, London University, 1986. Proprietor, Ogwugwu Afor Publishing Company, 198283. Member of Home Secretary's Advisory Council on Race, 1979, and of Arts Council of Great Britain, 198283.AWARDS, HONORS: Jock Campbell Award, New Statesman, 1978, for literature by new or unregarded talent from Africa or the Caribbean; selected as the Best Black British Writer, 1978, and one of the Best British Young Writers, 1983.WRITINGS:In the Ditch, Barrie & Jenkins (London, England), 1972.Second-Class Citizen (novel), Allison & Busby (London, England), 1974, Braziller (New York, NY), 1975.The Bride Price: A Novel, Braziller (New York, NY), 1976, also published as The Bride Price: Young Ibo Girl's Love; Conflict of Family and Tradition.The Slave Girl: A Novel, Braziller (New York, NY), 1977.The Joys of Motherhood: A Novel, Braziller (New York, NY), 1979.Destination Biafra: A Novel, Schocken (New York, NY), 1982.Naira Power (novelette), Macmillan (London, England), 1982.Double Yoke (novel), Schocken (New York, NY), 1982.The Rape of Shavi (novel), Ogwugwu Afor (Ibuza, Nigeria), 1983, Braziller (New York, NY), 1985.Adah's Story: A Novel, Allison & Busby (London, England), 1983.Head above Water (autobiography), Ogwugwu Afor (Ibuza, Nigeria), 1984, Collins (London, England), 1986.The Family (novel), Braziller (New York, NY), 1990.Gwendolen (novel), Collins (London, England), 1990.Kehinde, Heinemann (Portsmouth, NH), 1994.The New Tribe, Heinemann (Portsmouth, NH), 2000.FOR CHILDRENTitch the Cat (based on story by daughter Alice Emecheta), Allison & Busby (London, England), 1979.Nowhere to Play (based on story by daughter Christy Emecheta), Schocken (New York, NY), 1980.The Moonlight Bride, Oxford University Press (Oxford, England), 1981.The Wrestling Match, Oxford University Press (Oxford, England), 1981, Braziller (New York, NY), 1983.Family Bargain (publication for schools), British Broadcasting Corp. (London, England), 1987.OTHER(Author of introduction and commentary) Maggie Murray, Our Own Freedom (book of photographs), Sheba Feminist (London, England), 1981.A Kind of Marriage (teleplay; produced by BBC-TV), Macmillan (London, England), 1987.Also author of teleplays Tanya, a Black Woman, produced by BBC-TV, and The Juju Landlord. Contributor to journals, including New Statesman, Times Literary Supplement, and Guardian.SIDELIGHTS: Although Buchi Emecheta has resided in London since 1962, she is "Nigeria's best-known female writer," commented John Updike in the New Yorker. "Indeed, few writers of her sex have arisen in any part of tropical Africa." Emecheta enjoys great popularity in Great Britain, and she has gathered an appreciative audience on this side of the Atlantic as well. Although Emecheta has written children's books and teleplays, she is best known for her historical novels set in Nigeria, both before and after independence. Concerned with the clash of cultures and the impact of Western values upon agrarian traditions and customs, Emecheta's work is strongly autobiographical, and, as Updike observed, much of it is especially concerned with "the situation of women in a society where their role, though crucial, was firmly subordinate and where the forces of potential liberation have arrived with bewildering speed."Born to Ibo parents in Yaba, a small village near Lagos, Nigeria, Emecheta indicates that the Ibos "don't want you to lose contact with your culture," wrote Rosemary Bray in the Voice Literary Supplement. Bray explained that the oldest woman in the house plays an important role in that she is the "big mother" to the entire clan. Said Bray: "'She was very old and almost blind,'" Bu-chi recalls, "'And she would gather the young children around her after dinner and tell stories to us.'" The stories the children heard were about their origins and an-cestors; and, according to Bray, Emecheta recalls: "I thought to myself 'No life could be more important than this.' So when people asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up I told them I wanted to be a storytellerwhich is what I'm doing now."In the Ditch, her first book, originally appeared as a series of columns in the New Statesman. Written in the form of a diary, it "is based on her own failed marriage and her experiences on the dole in London trying to rear alone her many children," stated Charlotte and David Bruner in World Literature Today. Called a "sad, sonorous, occasionally hilarious extraordinary first novel," by Adrianne Blue of the Washington Post Book World, it details her impoverished existence in a foreign land, as well as her experience with racism, and "illuminates the similarities and differences between cultures and attitudes," remarked a Times Literary Supplement contributor, who thought In the Ditch merits "special attention."Similarly autobiographical, Emecheta's second novel, Second-Class Citizen, "recounts her early marriage years, when she was trying to support her student-husbanda man indifferent to his own studies and later indifferent to her job searches, her childbearing, and her resistance to poverty," observed the Bruners. The novel is about a young, resolute, and resourceful Nigerian girl who, despite traditional tribal domination of females, manages to continue her own education; she marries a student and follows him to London, where he becomes abusive toward her. "Emecheta said people find it hard to believe that she has not exaggerated the truth in this autobiographical novel," reported Nancy Topping Bazin in Black Scholar. "The grimness of what is described does indeed make it painful to read." Called a "brave and angry book" by Marigold Johnson in the Times Literary Supplement, Emecheta's story, however, "is not accompanied by a misanthropic whine," noted Martin Levin in the New York Times Book Review. Alice Walker, who found it "one of the most informative books about contemporary African life" that she has read, observed in Ms. that "it raises fundamental questions about how creative and prosaic life is to be lived and to what purpose.""Emecheta's women do not simply lie down and die," observed Bray. "Always there is resistance, a challenge to fate, a need to renegotiate the terms of the uneasy peace that exists between them and accepted traditions." Bray added that "Emecheta's women know, too, that between the rock of African traditions and the hard place of encroaching Western values, it is the women who will be caught."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," wrote Richard Cima in Library Journal. The young girl's father dies when she is thirteen; and, 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. Susannah Clapp maintained in the Times Literary Supplement, that the quality of the novel "depends less on plot or characterization than on the information conveyed about a set of customs and the ideas which underlay them." Calling it "a captivating Nigerian novel lovingly but unsentimentally written, about the survival of ancient marriage customs in modern Nigeria," Valerie Cunningham added in New Statesman that this book "proves Buchi Emecheta to be a considerable writer."Emecheta's Slave Girl: A Novel is about "a poor, gently raised Ibo girl who is sold into slavery to a rich African marketwoman by a feckless brother at the turn of the century," wrote a New Yorker contributor. Educated by missionaries, she joins the new church where she meets the man she eventually marries. In Library Journal, Cima thought that the book provides an "interesting 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," wrote Cunningham in the New Statesman, adding that the book indicts both "pagan and Christian inhumanity to women." And although a contributor to World Literature Today suggested that the "historical and anthropological background" in the novel tends to destroy its "emotional complex," another contributor to the same journal believed that the sociological detail has been "unobtrusively woven into" it and that The Slave Girl represents Emecheta's "most accomplished work so far. It is coherent, compact and convincing.""Emecheta's voice has been welcomed by many as helping to redress the somewhat one-sided picture of African women that has been delineated by male writers," according to a contributor to A New Reader's Guide to African Literature. Writing in African Literature Today, Eustace Palmer indicated that "the African novel has until recently been remarkable for the absense of what might be called the feminine point of view." Because of the relatively few female African novelists, "the presentation of women in the African novel has been left almost entirely to male voices and their interest in African womanhood has had to take second place to numerous other concerns," continued Palmer. "These male novelists, who have presented the African woman largely within the traditional milieu, have generally communicated a picture of a male-dominated and male-oriented society, and the satisfaction of the women with this state of things has been completely taken for granted." Palmer added that the emergence of Emecheta and other "accomplished female African novelists seriously challenges all these cozy assumptions. The picture of the cheerful contented female complacently accepting her lot is replaced by that of a woman who is powerfully aware of the unfairness of the system and who longs to be else's appendage." For instance, Palmer noted that The Joys of Motherhood: A Novel "presents essentially the same picture of traditional society but the difference lies in the prominence in Emecheta's novel of the female point of view registering its disgust at male chauvinism and its dissatisfaction with what it considers an unfair and oppressive system."The Joys of Motherhood is about a woman "who marries but is sent home in disgrace because she fails to bear a child quickly enough," wrote Bazin. "She then is sent to the city by her father to marry a man she has never seen. She is horrified when she meets this second husband because she finds him ugly, but she sees no alternative to staying with him. Poverty and repeated pregnancies wear her down; the pressure to bear male children forces her to bear child after child since the girls she has do not count." Palmer observed that "clearly, the man is the standard and the point of reference in this society. It is significant that the chorus of countrymen say, not that a woman without a child is a failed woman, but that a woman without a child for her husband is a failed woman." Bazin observed that in Emecheta's novels, "a woman must accept the double standard of sexual freedom: it permits polygamy and infidelity for both Christian and non-Christian men but only monogamy for women. These books reveal the extent to which the African woman's oppression is engrained in the African mores."Acknowledging that "the issue of polygamy in Africa remains a controversial one," Palmer stated that what Emecheta stresses in The Joys of Motherhood is "the resulting dominance, especially sexual, of the male, and the relegation of the female into subservience, domesticity and motherhood." Nonetheless, despite Emecheta's "angry glare," said Palmer, one can "glean from the novel the economic and social reasons that must have given rise to polygamy. But the author concentrates on the misery and deprivation polygamy can bring." Palmer praised Emecheta's insightful psychological probing of her characters' thoughts: "Scarcely any other African novelist has succeeded in probing the female mind and displaying the female personality with such precision." Blue likewise suggested that Emecheta "tells this story in a plain style, denuding it of exoticism, displaying an impressive, embracing compassion." Calling it a "graceful, touching, ironically titled tale that bears a plain feminist message," Updike added that "in this compassionate but slightly distanced and stylized story of a life that comes to seem wasted, [Emecheta] sings a dirge for more than African pieties. The lives within The Joys of Motherhood might be, transposed into a different cultural key, those of our own rural ancestors."Emecheta's "works reveal a great deal about the lives of African women and about the development of feminist perspectives," observed Bazin, explaining that one moves beyond an initial perspective of "personal experience," to perceive "social or communal" oppression. This second perspective "demands an analysis of the causes of oppression within the social mores and the patriarchal power structure," added Bazin. Finding both perspectives in Emecheta's work, Bazin thought that her descriptions reveal "what it is like to be for" millions of black African women. Although her feminist perspective is anchored in her own personal life, said Bazin, Emecheta "grew to understand how soon preference, bride price, polygamy, menstrual taboos, wife beating, early marriages, early and unlimited pregnancies, arranged marriages, and male dominance in the home functioned to keep women powerless." The Bruners wrote that "obviously Emecheta is concerned about the plight of women, today and yesterday, in both technological and traditional societies, though she rejects a feminist label." Emecheta told the Bruners: "The main themes of my novels are African society and family; the historical, social, and political life in Africa as seen by a woman through events. I always try to show that the African male is oppressed and he too oppresses the African women. I have not committed myself to the cause of African women only. I write about Africa as a whole."Emecheta's Destination Biafra: A Novel is a story of the "history of Nigeria from the eve of independence to the collapse of the Biafran secessionist movement," wrote Robert L. Berner in World Literature Today. The novel has generated a mixed critical response, though.In the Times Literary Supplement, Chinweizu felt that it "does not convey the feel of the experience that was Biafra. All it does is leave one wondering why it falls so devastatingly below the quality of Buchi Emecheta's previous works." Noting, however, that

change as many African countries sought their independence in the postWorld War II period. The conflict stirred pressures for self-government in many colonial countries, and Nigeria began lobbying Great Britain for greater autonomy. After a series of short-lived constitutions, Nigeria achieved full independence in 1960.By this time, Emecheta had undergone significant changes of her own. Her mother died when she was young, and she was orphaned as a young girl when her father was killed serving with British troops in Burma, another British colony that had gained its independence in the late 1940s but was marred by internal strife and violence between nationalists and Communists vying for power. After being raised by her extended family for several years, Emecheta was educated at a Methodist missionary school until 1960, when she was sixteen. That same year she married Sylvester Onwordi, a student to whom she had been betrothed for five years.The couple moved to London so her husband could study accounting, a common occurrence for Africans from former British colonies. As many African countries moved toward and achieved independence, scholarships were created so their citizens could become educated in Europe and the United States, then return and take on positions of responsibility at universities as well as in business and government. The couple eventually had five childrenFlorence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy, and Alice, but six years after their arrival, the couple separated after Emecheta suffered increasingly harsh abuse at her husband's hands. She was left to raise the children on her own.Autobiographical First Books After leaving her husband in 1966, Emecheta entered the University of London, graduating with a BS with honors in 1972. She also held a post as a library officer with the British Museum in London from 1965 to 1969. Between 1969 and 1976, she was a youth worker and sociologist with the Inner London Education Authority and wrote her first fiction works. Emecheta's first two books, In the Ditch (1972) and Second Class Citizen (1974), are heavily autobiographical.The books describe her childhood in Lagos, her 1960 marriage to Onwordi, and their move to England. But the novelsfollowing the early years of her fictionalized self, the protagonist, Adahalso concentrate on her struggle to support and bring up five children alone. In the Ditch begins at the point when she has left her husband and is living on her own with her children in a slum, supporting them by working in the library at the British Museum. The book is a collection of observations that Emecheta had originally sent to the New Statesman, which published them and thereby launched her writing career.Continued Struggles The autobiography of the first two novels continues in Head Above Water (1986)describing Emecheta's continued struggle to bring up her family as a single parent, to earn a degree in sociology, to find jobs, and to continue to write. The novel ends with the achievement of two major goals: the purchase of a house of her own and her settling down to become a full-time writer. In between, Head Above Water explores social conditions in black London and sheds interesting light on Emecheta's development as a writer, as it describes her involvement with each of her emerging novels.Emphasis on Social Slavery The manuscript that the oppressive husband Francis burns in Second Class Citizen surfaces as Emecheta's 1976 book, The Bride Price. With this book, set in the early 1950s in Lagos and Ibuza, she departs from her own life story. Despite this radical shift in subject matter, The Bride Price is a logical development of her writing as she continues to explore the injustices of caste and gender issues.LITERARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEMPORARIESEmecheta's famous contemporaries include:Vladimir Bukovsky (1942): Russian author and activist, best known for being a former Soviet political dissident who ran for the president of Russia in 2007.Jean-Luc Godard (1930): French filmmaker and a pioneer of French New Wave best known for directing such films as Breathless.Dustin Hoffman (1937): American film actor, best known for his roles in The Graduate (1967) and Tootsie (1982).Mick Jagger (1943): British rock musician, songwriter, and performer best known as the front man for the Rolling Stones.John Updike (1932): American fiction writer, best known for his Rabbit series of novels (19602001) and the novel The Witches of Eastwick (1984). He has won two Pulitzer Prizes.Emecheta's fifth book, The Slave Girl (1977), was published while Emecheta was employed as a social worker. Much of the book is devoted to a description of domestic slavery, the kind that persisted in Africa long after slavery was outlawed. Some Africans, as well as other ethnic groups, continued to sell people into slavery. Because women were not as highly regarded as men in society, young girls were sold for profit by their male relatives. Such girls were forced to become domestics or join the sex trade. The conditions for a domestic servant are paralleled with those of woman's conditions in marriage in her next novel, The Joys of Motherhood (1979). After an interlude of four pleasant children's books, Emecheta's authorship took a new turn with Destination Biafra (1982), which focuses the larger subject of war.Career Change By this time Emecheta had left social work behind and was a visiting professor at the University of Calabar from 1980 to 1981. In 1982, she took a faculty position at the University of London. Emecheta also ran the Ogwugwu Afor Publishing Company, which has branches in London and Ibuza, Nigeria, from 1982 to 1983, and published her next two novels through the publisher. With her 1983 work, Double Yoke, she returned to more manageable settings and subject matter, and picked up with her discussions of prejudices. This time the emphasis was on those prejudices of Nigerian men against educated women in Nigeria. Independence for women in Nigeria, according to this novel, was still a leap, and the relationship between the sexes still resembles a war.Double Yoke and her next book carry that imprint. As an allegory about the relationship between Europe and Africa, The Rape of Shavi (1983) represented yet another new departure in Emechet's writing. Emecheta seemed to be searching for the best values in the worldviews of these two civilizations, but as they appear stubbornly incompatible, the author took a middle course. Gwendolen (1989) returned to the London black-immigrant theme that Emecheta knew so well. For the first time, though, the main character was not a Nigerian but a West Indian.Published Fewer Novels While Emecheta only published two novels after GwendolenKehinde (1994) and The New Tribe (2000)both continued to touch on the author's long-running themes and are set in both London and Africa. Kehinde traces the events in the life of a middle-aged, professional woman of Nigerian descent who, after living in London for several years, returns to Nigeria and gains a new appreciation of her accomplishments. In contrast, The New Tribe focused on the difficult journey of self-discovery of a young man of Nigerian descent who leaves his adopted family in England to find his roots in Africa, encounters corruption, theft, and illness, and returns to England.Still based in London, Emecheta continues to hold visiting lectureship posts and returns to Nigeria regularly to visit her family.Works in Literary ContextEmecheta has always proclaimed that much of her fiction is based on her own life. She could well echo the words of Johann von Goethe, who said not only that nothing would be found in his writings that he had not experienced himself, but also that nothing in them was in exactly the form in which he had experienced it. Emecheta's early years spent in Nigeria and England have given her material for her most successful novels. The realism of much of her writings has led critics to categorize her as a documentarist.Social Influences and Feminist Themes It is evident that Emecheta was sorely impacted in childhood by gender biaswhen, for example, she almost missed getting an education because girls were kept at home while boys were sent to school. Because she negotiated rights for herself, Emecheta was able to receive a decent education. The influence of social values with regard to women is also apparent, as it became an early theme that prevailed throughout her work.Central to many of her novels is the role of women in present-day Africa. In her fiction, she shows courage by challenging traditional male attitudes about gender roles. She expresses anger and iconoclastic contempt for unjust institutions, no matter how time-honored or revered they are. She also displays a willingness to seek new ways to break what she sees as the unjust subjugation of women in the name of tradition.COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCEHere are a few works by writers who have also emphasized feminist themes:As You Like it (15991600), a play by William Shakespeare. In this pastoral comedy, double (or even triple) disguises make way for gender reversals and several humorous misconceptions and mishaps.The Birthday of the World (2003), a collection of short stories by Ursula K. LeGuin. This book explores themes such as gender segregation, marriage between four people, and the disruption of a society whose rulers are God.A Room of One's Own (1929), an essay by Virginia Woolf. In this book-length essay, the author explores the early politics of women writers and writing.The Handmaid's Tale (1985), a novel by Margaret Atwood. In this dystopian novel, the author speculates on a horrifying future of gender division, reproductive control, and religious totalitarian takeover by the small elite class.Women Without Men (1989), a novel by Shahrnush Parsipur. This explosive novel was banned by the Iranian government for its defiant portrayal of women's sexuality, and its author was arrested and jailed.Second Class Citizen, for instance, portrays a young Adah as an unusually determined little girl whose mind is firmly set on getting a Western education, from which she has been effectively barred because she is only a girl. This sets a basic theme that runs through Emecheta's entire body of work: an intense anger at the sexual discrimination that is at the core of the culture of her people and a concomitant contempt for the men who perpetuate it. The theme of the slavelike conditions of marriage for a woman is developed in The Joys of Motherhood. Even Gwendolen (1989), whose main theme is incest, lends itself to the well-known scenario of girls and women oppressed by men and fighting for self-respect.Works in Critical ContextEmecheta is praised for her convincing characterizations, thorough presentation of social themes, and vivid sense of place. Because she exposes such African customs as polygamy, servitude, and arranged marriagesas practices that curtail the power and individuality of womensome critics categorize her works as feminist literature. Her feminism, though mild in Western eyes (and though she refuses to be called a feminist), and her criticism of aspects of African cultural tradition have enraged some male African critics, who claim that Emecheta misrepresents Igbo society.In the Ditch and Second Class Citizen Critics praised Emecheta for her straightforward prose and amusing yet poignant evocation of her heroine's tribulations in the books. Rosemary Bray in the Voice Literary Supplement commented, Both books are simply told, bearing the mark of painful authenticity even before you know they are autobiographical. [Emecheta] wrote them to rid herself of rage at a society and a man who could not accept her independent spirit.Responses to LiteratureThough Emecheta resists the feminist label, the bulk of critical discussion of her work concerns the feminist attitude. In a group effort, take sides to debate whether her works can or should be categorized as feminist. To support arguments for and against, consider scenarios in which women lose their humanity in brutal marital battles, how female characters define their femininity (through sexuality? motherhood?), and where descriptions are or are not attacks against men.Make an effort to list several definitions and types of family. What constitutes a family as you understand it? Then, consider Emecheta's comments on family in The Joys of Motherhood. How do your two definitions compare? Where do they differ? What does this tell you about yourself and/or your own family? What does this tell you about the author?Go on a Web adventure to find background research on the Igbo culture in general and Yoruba women in particular (the following Web site at Emory University might be helpful: What are the expectations of men and of women in Igbo culture? What are the values? What in Emecheta's novels demonstrates an opposition to these values and gender role expectations?BIBLIOGRAPHYBooksSougou, Omar. The Experience of an African Woman in Britain: A Reading of Buchi Emecheta's Second Class Citizen,. In Crisis and Creativity in the New Literatures in English. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990.Taiwo, Oladele. Female Novelists of Modern Africa. London: Macmillan, 1984.Umeh, Marie. Reintegration with the Lost Self: A Study of Buchi Emecheta's Double Yoke. In Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature. 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Contemporary Writers: Buchi Emecheta. Retrieved April 25, 2008, from Benecia L. Buchi Emecheta Literary Discussions. Retrieved April 25, 2008, from . Last updated Fall 2007. views updated May 17 2018Nationality: British. Born: Lagos, Nigeria, 21 July 1944. Education: Methodist Girls' High School, Lagos; University of London, B.Sc. (honors) in sociology 1972. Family: Married Sylvester Onwordi in 1960 (separated 1969); two sons and three daughters. Career: Librarian, 1960-64; library officer, British Museum, London, 1965-69; youth worker and resident student, Race, 1974-76; community worker, Camden Council, London, 1976-78; visiting lecturer at 11 universities in the United States, 1979; senior research fellow and visiting professor of English, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 1980-81; lecturer, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, 1982. Since 1982, lecturer, University of London. Proprietor, Ogwugwu Afo Publishing Company, London; since 1979, member of the Home Secretary's Advisory Council on Race. Address: 7 Briston Grove, London N8 9EX, England.PublicationsNovelsIn the Ditch. London, Barrie and Jenkins, 1972.Second-Class Citizen. London, Allison and Busby, 1974; New York, Braziller, 1975.The Bride Price. London, Allison and Busby, and New York, Braziller, 1976.The Slave Girl. London, Allison and Busby, and New York, Braziller, 1977.The Joys of Motherhood. London, Allison and Busby, and New York, Braziller, 1979.Destination Biafra. London, Allison and Busby, 1982.Double Yoke. London, Ogwugwu Afo, 1982; New York, Braziller, 1983.Adah's Story. London, Allison and Busby, 1983.The Rape of Shavi. London, Ogwugwu Afo, 1983; New York, Braziller, 1985.A Kind of Marriage. London, Macmillan, 1986.Gwendolen. London, Collins, 1989; as The Family, New York, Braziller, 1990.Kehinde. Oxford, Heinemann, 1994.Fiction (for children)Titch the Cat. 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Trenton, New Jersey, Africa World Press, 1999.* * *The title Second-Class Citizen which Buchi Emecheta chose for one of her most successful novels constitutes a very fair summary of the major theme which she explores. She always feels for the oppressed and presents their plight in a way that engages the reader's sympathy. From childhood on she observed life in Nigeria, and since her early twenties she has looked at the ways of the west through the skeptical, appraising eyes of a trained sociologist. And what she has seen, whether in Africa or England, has been a bleak picture of antagonisms and tyranny. There are flashes of humor and moments of happiness, but generally she depicts the scouring of human relationships by the desire of the powerful to dominate and exploit those who are weaker.Married life she depicts as a battle of the sexes, and if some white males are shown in a bad light, that is nothing compared with the portrayal of the Nigerian men. Francis, in Second-Class Citizen, is a Nigerian immigrant in London whose thoughtlessness is the ruin of his more gifted wife; lazy, egotistical, and feckless, he compounds every problem that confronts the pair in their struggle to make ends meet, and his sexual demands and irresponsibility about parenthood leave Adah a physical wreck, distraught and without a penny in her pocket. In The Joys of Motherhood we become aware of the mordant irony of the title as the novel chronicles the misfortunes of Nnu Ego, a simple Nigerian girl who comes to Lagos to marry and suffers every kind of humiliation as her husband proves himself incapable of overcoming the admittedly difficult circumstances of his wretched existence. Her agony reaches its peak when, in accord with custom, he takes as his second wife the widow of his brother and thoroughly enjoys the tensions this naturally creates.Tyranny and heartlessness outside the domestic sphere also rouse Emecheta's ire. For many young people in Nigeria education seems to offer a route towards self-fulfillment, but Double Yoke shows what the price can be when a young girl tries to cope with the rival claims of tradition and modernity within a system which fundamentally has little to offer that is really valid. The cynicism of the whole enterprise is revealed when the heroine realizes she must trade sexual favors with her professor if she is to gain the examination results she covets. Once she has qualifications she will perhaps be able, like Adah in Second-Class Citizen, to go to the United Kingdom and enjoy what it has to offer. In fact, as Second-Class Citizen and its grim predecessor, In the Ditch, show, London is a hostile world where racialism is rife and housing is squalid. There is the welfare state, of course, yet it operates in such a way that a talented and qualified young woman is gradually but inexorably pauperized and deskilled. Destination Biafra is a chilling account of a different sort of horror, the disastrous civil war that ripped Nigeria apart in the difficult times immediately after the withdrawal of the inadequate colonial powers. No atrocity is too cruel for men in brief authority, and though Emecheta has sympathy for everyone, it is natural that the women are shown as those who suffer the most.Gwendolen changes the focus to some degree, presenting the plight of Caribbean immigrants in London primarily through the perspective of the difficulties that a young girl has in finding any sort of fulfillment as a child and teenager in a culture which means very little to her at any time. A perfect symbol of this failure of integration lies in the fact that even her own family finds pronouncing her rather highfalutin name impossibly difficult. Emecheta is far from ascribing all her heroine's ills to the failure of the citizens of her adopted country to take her to their heart, though there are some criticisms, especially of the education service, that strike home. Gwendolen's misfortunes had, however, already begun before she ever left Jamaica, and in London tensions within the immigrant community are shown to be particularly damaging. Beneath the psychological problems of immigrants there runs, moreover, the deep current of protest at the exploitation of women by men whose sexual demands are never diminished by any sense of their only too apparent personal inadequacies and general fecklessness.Few will seek to deny that Emecheta has grounds for the complaints she makes about marital relationships in particular and about the interplay of social and political forces in general. Yet she loads the dice a little too much. The girls and women she takes as her heroines always possess something which places them above the ordinary run of those with whom they mix. Birth or superior intelligence makes them outstanding. But it also has the unfortunate consequence of making them atypical of the group they represent. There is, too, some idealization of rural society in Nigeria in former times. It certainly had merits, which colonial powers were stupid not to recognize, yet by concentrating on the more advantaged members of such communities Emecheta distorts the picture. The problem becomes most acute in The Rape of Shavi, a somewhat mannered allegorical tale of Europeans who are fleeing from an impending cataclysm, and who have the privilege of insight into an almost Utopian Africa.For the most part, however, Emecheta's mode is realistic. Indeed, Kehinde tackles the problem of idealization head-on, as the title character moves with her husband Albert from Londonwhere she has lived for 18 yearsback to Lagos. There she is overwhelmed by the appalling conditions of life, not least her expected role as virtual servant to Albert's every whim. And though Destination Biafra contains some devastating pictures of the pretentiousness and luxurious lifestyle of upper-class Nigerians, Emecheta generally concerns herself with the straightforward portrayal of the underprivileged. There is some description of locales, with Nigerian names for plants, foodstuffs, and fabrics adding a dash of local color which sometimes contrasts, especially in the earlier novels, a little too obviously with literary allusions in a dated English tradition. Dialogue is invariably crisp, highlighting important turns in the narrative or enhancing characterization. Above all, Emecheta is a storyteller. The titles of her novels, like the chapter headings, are direct and explicit, helping the reader to see the way forward through narratives that have the power to convince as well as the capacity to arouse sympathy with the misfortunes depicted.Christopher Smith views updated May 21 2018EMECHETA, (Florence Onye) Buchi. British (born Nigeria), b. 1944. Genres: Novels, Sociology, Autobiography/Memoirs. Career: British Museum, London, Library Officer, 1965-69; Inner London Education Authority, Youth Worker and Sociologist, 1969-. Publications: In the Ditch, 1972; Second Class Citizen, 1974; The Bride Price, 1976; The Slave Girl, 1977; Titch the Cat, 1979; Joys of Motherhood, 1979; Nowhere to Play, 1980; The Moonlight Bride, 1981; Destination Biafra, 1982; Naira Power, 1982; Double Yoke, 1982; The Rape of Shavi, 1983; The Wrestling Match, 1983; Head above Water (autobiography), 1986; A Kind of Marriage, 1986; Gwendolyn, 1989 in US as The Family, 1990; Kehinde, 1994; The New Tribe, 2000. Address: 7 Briston Grove, Crouch End, London N8 9EX, England. views updated Jun 11 2018 Buchheim, Lothar-Gnther 1918-2007 Buchez, Philippe Joseph Benjamin Bucherer, Alfred Heinrich Buchanan, Vera Daerr (19021955) Buchanan, Thomas C. 1967 Buchanan, Robert Earle (1883-1972) Buchanan, Patrick J. 1938- (Patrick Joseph Buchanan) Buchla, Donald (Frederick) Buchmann, Stephen L. 1955(?)- Buchmann, Stephen L. 1955(?) Buchner, Friedrich Karl Christian Ludwig Bchner, Luise (18211877) Buchner, Philipp Friedrich Buchner, Ze'Ev Wolf ben David HaKohen Bucholz, Christian Friedrich