



IMPACT OF TRADITION ON IGBO WOMAN IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *KEHINDE*

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Abstract

Buchi Emecheta, a renowned female writer from Africa depicts the clash between tradition and modernity in the modern Nigerian society in her writings. Emecheta opposes African patriarchy and defies the depiction of black women in African literature. She also raises her voice against the traditional practices which limit the survival of women in the male-dominated society of Africa. Her writings particularly express black women's subordinate position governed by the Igbo culture and traditions. This paper explores the protagonist, Kehinde's strong determination in creating a way for her in the traditional Igbo society. Kehinde is a modern African woman who defies traditional African roots while maintaining her sovereignty and identity.

Key words: Patriarchy, Polygamy, Culture, Tradition, Education, Self-achievement.

Introduction

The term 'tradition' refers to a long-established custom or belief that has been passed on from one generation to another. Traditions are those values that have been observed in the family, community or society at large. Gyekye offers a more accurate and complete definition of tradition as follows: "A tradition is any cultural product that was created and pursued by generations and that, having been accepted and preserved, in whole or in part, by successive generations, has been maintained to the present". (221). Tradition is a mysterious, stoic, and all-pervasive element in the lives of Emecheta's characters. In the novel *Kehinde*, the protagonist gains independence by breaking free from restrictive Igbo traditions. The primary intention of Emecheta's presentation of the subject of freedom is to show how women suffer or succeed in the face of patriarchal norms. She also reveals how to use the weapons necessary to break the chain of traditions that limit women's freedom. These weapons in Emecheta's works are primarily Western education and financial independence.

In *Kehinde*, Emecheta introduces the story of a woman who questions her position as a Nigerian female and searches for independence. Albert and Kehinde Okolo, the Nigerian migrant couple live in London for 18 years until Albert's sisters insisted him to come back to Nigeria. Kehinde disagrees with them since their two children have never visited Nigeria and have resided in London. Kehinde was the only member in the family who enjoyed their stay in England. Albert could scarcely conceal his joy at the prospect of returning home, and the children had caught his enthusiasm. On her part, Kehinde has no illusions about returning to Nigeria. She is perplexed and, at best, hesitant at the notion of returning to Nigeria, having become so accustomed to her London environment and, completely disconnected from her traditional Igbo heritage. Kehinde attempts to survive on her own as a lonely woman once Albert and the children depart to Nigeria. Meanwhile, she realizes, that she is a half-person without her husband, and she plans to flee to Nigeria.

Albert and Kehinde Okolo arrive in London in the mid-1960s, when it is quite easy for immigrants to find work. Albert, who worked in a low-paying profession, was more affected by the prejudice that lurked behind England's social gloss. Kehinde, on the other hand, held a prominent position at a bank and was treated almost equal

to her white peers. The majority of the income comes from Kehinde, and it is reasonable to state that Albert and his two children are completely reliant on Kehinde's income. They understand that "they would return eventually and build their own house in Ibuza, their home village" since they see themselves as temporary exiles (41).

Albert's vision for a comfortable life in Nigeria encounters a terrible obstacle when Kehinde learns that she is pregnant. This implies that their money will be gone, and Albert will be unable to save "for their home-coming on his income alone, to say nothing of feeding another mouth" (22). Kehinde's delight at becoming pregnant with her third child is shattered when she learns that her husband wants her to have an abortion. Nigerians, generally, wishes to have numerous kids as "In Nigeria, many children are a sign of wealth and necessity. Children function as the retirement fund for ageing parents; and male children assure the family's lineage" (Umeh, 172). Igbo customs place much emphasis on children and regard abortion as an "abomination" (72). However, nothing will stop Albert from returning home and reclaiming his birthright, so he convinces Kehinde to undergo an abortion. She violates the tradition by following Albert's wishes and aborts her child. Kehinde unwillingly consents to abortion against her objections and Igbo-infused social ideals, because there is no other option for her.

Without Kehinde's knowledge the abortion foreshadows the end of her marriage to Albert. Albert, as an Igbo man, understands that abortion is an erroneous act, but he convinces himself and Kehinde that they are living in a strange land (England) where displaced people do things that are contrary to their own way of life. The abortion has left Kehinde severely injured, and as a result, Taiwo returns to the land of the living to chasten and warn her about what is yet to come. Taiwo is Kehinde's twin, meaning the first twin to taste the world. Tragically, both her mother and sister die at birth, leaving Kehinde as the sole survivor. Aunt Nnebogo takes her, believing that such a child will bring her bad luck according to her tradition, and the two begin to live together "in far-off Lagos, where the Yoruba people believe that twins bring luck, and give them special names: Taiwo and Kehinde" (18). One might make a comparison between the Yoruba people's belief that Kehinde brings good luck, and the situation in her birthplace, which is quite the contrary.

The novel's frequent appearances by Taiwo are significant and reveal something about Emecheta's fusion of Igbo and Yoruba traditions in Kehinde. Emecheta, who was born in Igbo but was reared in Lagos, is well-versed in both cultures (Yoruba). Taiwo and Kehinde are identical twins, but Taiwo dies shortly after birth. According to Yoruba "ibeji" belief, a Taiwo will continue to exercise her spiritual power over a Kehinde.

Brenda Berrian clearly illustrates the connection of Yoruba and Igbo twin concepts: "Formerly, [the] Igbo abhorred the birth of twins and eliminated them and sometimes the mother, whereas the Yoruba have always revered twins. With the intervention of Christian missionaries and changing value systems, twins are presently cherished by the Yoruba and tolerated by the Igbo" (170). In the past, Igbos disliked twins and, in some circumstances, their mothers; whereas, the Yoruba have always valued twins. As stated by Kofi Asare Opoku, "The souls of the twins are believed to be inseparable and when one of the twins dies, a little ibeji statuette is carved to serve as the abode of the dead twin" (106). Emecheta gives the unearthly philosophy in Kehinde by using this concept about twin goddesses. Connecting to the soul of her twin Taiwo, Kehinde figures out what a Lagos-born lady in London needs to do to find happiness. Emecheta has fused the Yoruba concept in Taiwo with the Igbo faith in "chi", one's spiritual twin, or guardian angel. Taiwo appears periodically to rebuke, advise, guide, and lead her sister, Kehinde. One of these incidents occurred just prior to her abortion. She is lonely and perplexed when she hears Taiwo's words: "Our mother died having you. I too died so you could live. Are you now going to kill your child before he has a chance of life?" (17). When Kehinde begins to feel lonesome and worried about Albert after he returns to Nigeria, Taiwo, "that intrusive inner voice," intervenes again to confirm her fears and urge her to go back to Lagos and prevent Albert from getting another woman, because Nigerian men consider it manly to be unfaithful (46). As a result, Emecheta utilizes Taiwo to signify spiritual guidance for her protagonist.

Kehinde's life becomes pathetic while trying to sell their house in London. The fact that other Nigerians ignore her adds to her feelings of loneliness and marginalisation. Kehinde, despite her adaptability in England, nevertheless holds on to her Nigerian traditional practices as a paradigm of existence. When the forces that kept the model alive fade away, life becomes a living misery for her; in other words, when she loses her husband, children, and Nigerian community, she feels like an alien, and London becomes a strange place for her. She has to travel to Nigeria to reunite her shattered self, in other words, to find a home.

Kehinde's return to the home country is the most traumatic and frustrating experience of her life. For Kehinde, Lagos is another hell, far worse than the one she encountered in England. Upon her arrival, she understands

that her husband has “claimed his birthright” –polygamy. Albert has married another woman, a highly educated bride who works in a university.

When Kehinde questions Albert for taking the role of a typical African male patriarch, he replies: “I know you are angry. But look back, Kehinde. My father had two wives, yours had three, so what sin did I commit that is so abominable?” (86). Polygamy, as a societal evil gained acceptance among the people with exposure to Western education, but males continued to follow the traditional path, which catered to the idea that a man requires numerous wives. When Albert turns to polygamy, Kehinde discovers the image she had made up of him falling around her. He had the opinion that polygamy was humiliating for women when he was wooing her, which he relied on his own experience with his father’s two wives (84). However, he eventually defends himself, claiming that polygamy was all in the tradition that both of their fathers practiced. Kehinde understands she can’t speak out against a tradition that says “it is considered manly for men to be unfaithful” (46).

Polygamy is difficult for Kehinde to accept, particularly after spending a long time in England and being so westernized. She can’t stand a number of other traditions that seem absurd to her, such as the fact that she can’t address her husband by his first name instead she must refer to him as “our husband or Joshua’s father” (71).

Women who have experienced the progressive viewpoint of the Western world find African traditionalism restrictive. Traditionalism is presented as oppressive and harmful to women in Kehinde, as it is in most of Emecheta’s other novels. It was again the traditional practices that facilitate Rike, Albert’s second wife to hook a “been-to” man. Rike is a figure created by Emecheta to represent African women who mindlessly obey society’s fixed conventions, even when they are harmful to their personal development. These women are the true enemies of womanhood because they support patriarchy by their quiet acquiescence.

Kehinde’s life is turned upside down when she is forced to become “the senior wife of a successful Nigerian man” (73). Kehinde is unable to talk about her feelings with Albert or accept the position she is supposed to perform in Nigerian society. Kehinde decides to return to England after leaving Nigeria. The fact that Kehinde rejected polygamy and returned to England explains her conviction that she deserved to be cherished. Kehinde seized it for herself when Albert and his family refused to value her. Kehinde’s behaviour reflects her understanding of herself as more than a “wife,” but as a “woman” worthy of respect. After her arrival in England, Kehinde’s dead sister Taiwo’s spirit states: “Home, sweet home!” and advises Kehinde that “we make our own choices as we go along...This is yours. There’s nothing to be ashamed of in that” (108). With her twin, Kehinde accomplishes a triumph over the powers that abused her. Neither crushed by the Igbo world nor completely acclimatized into the western world, Kehinde grasps those qualities which are most useful for her way of life.

Education, according to Emecheta, is a step towards a female’s progression, self-fulfillment, and self-achievement. When Kehinde’s son, Joshua returns to England as a young man, he finds a mother who is more confident and satisfied. When he inquires about Mr. Gibson, a renter in their home, his mother exclaims: “this is my house, and I want him out”, Kehinde immediately corrects him and tells him that “it’s not quite like that. This is my house, though it may be yours one day” (137). Kehinde understands her worth and the desire to be recognised as a person and an individual, not merely as a woman constrained by cultural roles. Kehinde understands her position as a “woman” and lays significance on her womanhood by standing up to her son. When Joshua expresses dissatisfaction with his mother’s stance, Kehinde accepts the fact that: “claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human” (141). She declares to her Taiwo, “Now we are one,” (141). Kehinde finds the courage to go against the social conventions by joining herself with her “chi”. Kehinde rises beyond cultural conventions and constraints, learning to value her life and her distinct individuality as a woman. She feels proud to say “I have a degree, and a job at the Department of Social Services. I’m enjoying meeting people and leading my own life” (139).

Conclusion

Emecheta considers that Nigerian women like Kehinde represent the black woman survivor; much like her foremothers did during slavery. These women attempt to make the best of a horrible circumstance. Through Kehinde’s assertive and courageous attitude, Emecheta speaks about the prospects of Nigerian women worldwide achieving and claiming a sense of identity, as well as their proper place in society.

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