

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Conflict of Tradition and Modernity in Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*

Abstract: The ever-entangling conflict of tradition and modernity has always captured the literary world of most of the African writers. The long years of denigration and subjugation by the colonizers to the native Africans has left a hurt psyche for the colonised; thereby incapacitating them to exist meaningfully in both the traditional world and the modern world. This is the predicament of the native Africans who had been exposed to the western culture brought in by the colonizers. Buchi Emecheta's novel *Double Yoke* (1982) shows the conflict

of tradition and modernity in the modern Nigerian society. The traditional values, customs, and beliefs are central in the lives of both men and women in the Nigerian society. However, modernity with western education and lifestyle contest the previous tradition which results in a conflict of the two forces. In Emecheta's novel, when tradition tries to hold the centre, modernity decentralizes it. Emecheta also uses the concept of patriarchy to highlight the hardships that women face in the modern Nigerian society. The paper attempts to critically analyze the encounters of tradition and modernity present in the novel from the theoretical perspective of structuralism and post-structuralism. The study depicts that the conflict creates a dilemma for the modern educated woman in the Nigerian society to cope with the two conflicting forces.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, patriarchy, structuralism, post-structuralism.

1. Introduction:

The human society is always in a dynamic process of change from the old or traditional to the new or modern one. Post-colonial cultures are not static as Bill Ashcroft argues in his book *Post-colonial Transformation* (2001), "all cultures move in a constant state of transformation" (5). In this process of change, there occurs the clash of the two forces i.e. tradition and modernity in the society. The African society too is in a continuous state of change with the celebration of the traditional past and the reception of the modern values. The African writers try to capture the experience of the conflict faced by the African society in a demanding modern period through literature. The confrontation between traditional African values and Western modernity is one of the important issues which the African writers deal with. Chinua Achebe's famous novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) recounts the shambles of the cultural heritage of Igbo society caused by the gradual colonial expansion and assimilation of the White man's

ways of life and religion. Achebe describes the conflict of the tradition and modernity faced by the protagonist Okonkwo and the Igbo society with the advent of colonialism. The African women writers too have employed the theme of such conflicts but from their perspectives rejecting the canonical writings of the African male writers. Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) is one of the African women writers whose writings portray the conflict of the tradition and modernity in the modern Nigerian society from the African women's point of view. Emecheta attacks African patriarchy and challenges the portrayal of black women in African literature. She also questions the social practices which limit the existence of women in the male dominated society of Africa. As a diasporic writer, Emecheta had witnessed the conflict of the two forces in her time which she had tried to pen down in her writings. Some of her novels with the thematic issues of the conflict of tradition and modernity are *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Double Yoke* (1982).

The term 'tradition' denotes a long-established custom or belief *that* has been passed on from one generation to another (en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tradition) while 'modernity' is the quality or condition of being modern (en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tradition). Traditions are those values that have been observed in the family, community or society at large. They are always seen in oppositions with modernity such as old and new, ugly and beautiful, black and white etc. Some of the presumptions with the terms are explained by Kwame Gyekye in his book *Tradition and Modernity* (1997). He states that:

... sociologists and anthropologists depict the notion of the traditional as rural, agrarian, pre-scientific, resistant to change and innovation, and bound by the perception of its past. In contrast, the modern is characterized as scientific, innovative, future oriented and urbanized. (217)

The generalizations of the terms in binary opposites do not hold true every time. In this context, 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)

The literary theory of structuralism emphasizes the presence of a centre of meaning of a structure. The centre only holds together the structure of a system. The notion of centre is critically studied by Jacques Derrida in his paper “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (1966). He terms the desire for a centre as “logocentrism” in his seminal work *Of Grammatology* (1966). As Terry Eagleton explains the concept of logocentrism in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2008):

Western Philosophy.... has also been in a broader sense, ‘logocentric’, committed to a belief in some ultimate ‘word’, presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation for all our thought, language and experience. It has yearned for the sign which will give meaning to all others, – ‘the transcendental signifier’ – and for the anchoring, unquestioning meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (the transcendental signified’). (113)

A structure presupposes a centre which commands the structure and gives meanings to its components, and the acceptable interactions between them. According to Jacques Derrida, the centre limits the free play of the structure. Derrida rejects the idea that the centre is static and never changing. However, post-structuralism interrogates the centrality of the structure and decentres the centre. It is this decentering of the centre which helps the other elements to come into play. As Peter Barry argues in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2010):

For the structuralist, the culture we are part of can be ‘read’ like a language, using these principles, since culture is made up of many structural networks which carry significance and can be shown to operate in a systematic way. (45)

Likewise, tradition is at the centre and connects the people with common beliefs and practices. It defines a particular region or community. Social and cultural practices are abided by the people with utmost dedication and handed down from one generation to another. Tradition is furthered and encouraged to be followed by the younger generations for two reasons mainly. First, it is observed as a mark of paying respect to the older generations and their beliefs and second, it serves as a social and cultural tool in assigning different gender roles in a society. Modernity, on the other hand, dismantles or ruptures the centrality of tradition in a modern society. Modernity decentralizes whatever tradition has held on to because the society is in a state of change. Ashcroft (2001) states that culture changes “because they must cope with the demands of everyday life” (3). The conflict of the structuralism and post-structuralism is represented in the novel *Double Yoke* (1982) in the form of tradition and modernity. The traditional values, customs, and beliefs are central in the lives of both men and women in the Nigerian society. However, modernity with western education and lifestyle contest the previous tradition which results in a conflict of the two forces. Education which is a means of enlightenment has sadly become an alienating force in Africa. It dislocates, displaces the Africans from their tribal world thereby making them totally detribalized but imperfectly westernized. In Emecheta’s novel, when tradition tries to hold the centre, modernity decentralizes it. Emecheta also uses the concept of patriarchy to highlight the hardships that women face in the modern Nigerian society. The paper attempts to critically analyze the encounters of tradition and modernity present in the novel from the theoretical perspective of structuralism and post-structuralism.

In the novel *Double Yoke* (1982), tradition is observed in terms of cultural norms and practices, lifestyle and gender roles. Emecheta highlights three inter-related cultural and traditional concepts in the life of a Nigerian woman: virginity, marriage and motherhood. The traditional society of Nigeria demands its woman to be a virgin at the time of marriage, to be married and to be a mother of many children. *Double Yoke* discusses the importance and relevance of these three aspects and how it requires a change in a modern Nigerian society. The episode of the sexual encounter of Nko with Ete Kamba shows that the virginity of a woman before marriage is a matter of great concern in the Nigerian society. Ete Kamba deflowers Nko on his success party day for winning a scholarship in the university. The only proof of a bride being a virgin is her virginal blood which is expected of the bride to shed on the wedding night. So, Ete Kamba's search for Nko's virginal blood at the middle of the night with a torch light connotes the search for the traditional assurance of Nko's dignity and innocence because he himself "wanted a virgin, an educated virgin, nice wholesome unspoilt for his bride when he qualified." (DY 54). The relationship of Nko and Ete Kamba reflects the notion that a woman should be in control of a man both physically and psychologically. The after-effects of colonialism have somehow resulted in the birth of a rigid patriarchal culture in the African society. In a sense, Nko is being oppressed by Ete Kamba within their relationship. One way of preserving one's culture is through the style of dressing. This style of dressing defines the identity of a person of a particular ethnic group. Nko wears a simple blouse, skirt and a scarf on her head in the Nigerian style. Nko's dress reflects the simplicity and feminine qualities of women in her culture. However, Emecheta shows that Nko wears the scarf not on her will but on Ete Kamba's instructions. According to him, wearing a scarf makes her look innocent and suits her more. The scarf is symbolic in the sense that it shows Nko's blind submission and obedience towards her boyfriend. Emecheta reflects upon those women's lives that are taught from early childhood to accept the male privilege. Nko simply accepts Ete's

instruction and wears the scarf like a nun. In short, Ete Kamba sketches the identity of Nko how she should be through her dressing style. As E. Figs (1970) truly states about the role of patriarchy in shaping the distorted image of a woman:

The image of woman in patriarchy is presented to women in the mirror by men, and women were taught to dance to this image. What strikes one about this image is that it was created by men, not by men and women jointly for common ends, not by women for themselves, but by men, and this can be seen to be the real difficulty; the fact that the mirror, hence the image, is distorted. Men's vision is not objective, but an easy combination of what he wishes her to be, and what he fears her to be. And it is with this mirror image that women have to comply. (17)

Emecheta's writing depicts the passive submission of woman to the patriarchal decision in the modern Nigerian society because by such passivity, a Nigerian woman's future is secured. The future of Nko depends on her marriage with Ete Kamba. Nko's dream is to strike a balance between tradition and modernity in order to become "an academician and obedient wife" (DY 94). Emecheta's characters are under pressure to meet the demands of both tradition and modernity. They compromise between the old and new. Even though they live in a modern society, they are held back by traditional way of life. The craze for university degree is an important aspect of modernity which is reflected in the novel. The celebration of Ete Kamba's winning of a scholarship in the University of Calabar reveals the obsession for making the village young boys and girls university graduates. The family members of Ete Kamba look forward to his financial support after his university exam. Education serves as a stepping stone for securing their future not just for themselves but for their family and the community at large. Colonialism in Africa has brought western education and philosophy in the African society. Education has benefitted the people of Africa with job opportunities and enlightenment in the global sense. Colonial education under the garb of liberalization has nothing to offer to the

Africans but rather it gave way to split personality. Emecheta's woman protagonist Nko is to perform her role as an academician as demanded by modernity and on the other hand, tradition demands her to perform the role of an obedient wife. Education is one of the gateways for a woman to achieve personal freedom and identity, in short a chance to make her voice heard. In one of the interviews conducted by Joyce Boss (1988) Emecheta encourages the education of women as she firmly believes that "given the Big E—Education—the position of women can be very positive." (99). In this context, Nko's admission in the same university as Ete Kamba's can be considered a stepping stone for her ambition. Emecheta writes:

She had regarded herself as an extremely lucky girl. She would make the best of it. She would work hard at her studies and she was going to get not just a degree, but a good one. Then she would marry Ete Kamba and they would have about six children. They were not going to back anything because she would be working and Ete Kamba would be working as well. Theirs was going to be a good marriage, a marriage in which the two of them would complement each other. (DY 92)

Emecheta discusses the importance of marriage and motherhood in a woman's life in the traditional society. In the African society, children are considered as wealth in a family and as cultural and traditional means of enhancing a woman's social status. The more children a woman bears especially the male children, the higher is her status in the society. In this context, Louisa O'Brien (2001) highlights the definitions of the women in the African society:

In traditional culture, women are defined firstly by the men in their lives: initially by their fathers, then their husbands, then their sons. They are defined secondly by their sexuality and their maternity. (96)

As a result, the African women suffer from the different forms of marginalization. In the words of Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1997):

African women are products of multiple subjugations. Patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and gender imperialism all combine to act against the African woman's self assertion. (25)

The multiple subjugations hold back the development of a woman's individuality in Africa. In the midst of the different degrees of subjugations, the identity of a woman is distorted and her voice is lost in the society. She only plays to the character shaped by the patriarchy. Unlike the previous generation of her mother and Ete Kamba's mother who were housewives, Nko wants to work equally as her husband. The previous generations like Nko's mother enjoyed a different tradition of making themselves fat for their men. But Nko's generation demands a different type of tradition- to be educated because of the various opportunities that come with education. The burden of being born in a modern age is expressed by Nko's mother:

I think you modern girls are not so lucky. When I was your age, all I was thinking of was how to go to the fattening room and make myself round and beautiful for your father. . . Now you have this new thing, this mad education for women and yet still, you want to have everything we had. . . it is going to be difficult. We had to keep quiet, because we did not know many of the things our men knew. You may call us ignorant, but we were happy and contented in our ignorance. (DY 94)

Sexual exploitation of women by men takes place in a traditional society which demands women to be subordinate and considered women as sexual objects. Women are often traumatized by such exploitations and these exploitations leave a stigma in their lives. Emecheta's writing depicts the struggle through which a woman goes through in a male dominated society. It shows the vulnerability of women even in the academic environment. In order to tackle such exploitation of women by men, Emecheta makes her women characters bold and rational. This is one of the reasons that feminist streaks are found in her writings. Lloyd Brown (1981) gives credit to her strong representation of African women and her bold

style of writing as “the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct, feminist protest” (35). The sexual exploitation of Nko by one Professor Elder Ikot does cause dejection in Nko’s simple life but she gathers enough courage to fight for her dignity. Sadia Zulfiqar (2016) rightly comments that Emecheta’s work demonstrates that “women should be able to fight for their dignity and independence, and should not suffer in resigned silence.” (61). Nko declares:

I want a first class Honours Degree. I do not care how you do it, I want a First Class Honours. (DY 140)

Emecheta’s way of representing patriarchs like the professor shows that a woman is not safe in an overpowering patriarchal society. Her dignity is at stake. Nko is compelled to compromise her dignity with a first class grade in order to fulfill her dream because it is the only way to compensate her great loss. Ato Quayson (2007) truly states on the dilemma of African women being trapped in tradition and modernity:

Women’s existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that makes it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedom without severe sacrifices or compromise. (585)

Modernity does not shower in the new euphoria that every African woman dreamt of. She is still exploited and oppressed by men both in the traditional institution of relationship as well as in the modern and enlightening space like the university. Nko is first exploited by her boyfriend who is an epitome of traditional patriarchy and later she is sexually taken advantage of by the professor, the symbol of modern patriarchy. Through the novel, Emecheta tries to project the intention of the powerful and academic patriarchs like the professor who wears a mask of hypocrisy. In other words, Emecheta attacks African patriarchy both in traditional society as well as in a modern environment.

Further, Nko’s keeping of professor’s baby indicates the subversion of the traditional norm of her society. Nko’s intention of keeping the baby also points to the fact that the baby will fulfill

her dream of becoming a mother. However, to keep a baby outside marriage is not justified in the traditional sense. In the words of Ketu H. Katrak (1987), Nko's action is rooted in the "paradoxical relationships of both the traditional structures or patriarchy and the modern structures of urbanization." (159). Nko rejects the traditional concept of marriage. Emecheta through the mouthpiece of Miss Bulewao warns the modern African man to prepare themselves to accept the change in modern African woman as the lines in the novel suggest:

. . . are you strong enough to be a modern African man? Nko is already a modern African lady, but you are still lagging. . . oh, so far, far behind. (DY 162)

The title of the novel "Double Yoke" also holds significance in the sense that it implies to the double burdens of tradition and modernity. Harry Olufunwa (2003) pointed out that the twin burdens "make it extremely difficult for women to be successful in modern society." (40). Nko's initial dream of becoming a successful woman is made difficult by the conflict of tradition and modernity. Through the novel, Emecheta has brought into light the existing dilemma of African men and women in the modern society especially those of university and other academic atmosphere. However, the degree of suffering is more in the case of woman due to the traditional rigid patriarchy. Here, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's (1996) quotes are relevant:

By dealing with the troublesome issues of virginity and legitimizing a woman's outside child, Emecheta has courageously touched a sensitive point in gender relationships. In her scheme, she crushes the multiple yoke under which men and women operate and invalidates the religious evangelism that maintains the status quo to the disadvantage of women. (270)

Emecheta's novel shows that in a fast changing society of Africa especially Nigeria in the context of the novel, the traditional institutions and concepts are contested for they are restrictive and outdated with the modern demands. Nko fails to meet the traditional demands

of successful marriage and motherhood. The writer depicts that the Nigerian society is under crucial scrutiny to accept values which are more suitable to its present scenario. The conflict of tradition and modernity deepens more with the traditional patriarchal subjugations and creates a dilemma for the woman to cope with the confrontation.

The paper has studied the conflict of tradition and modernity present in Buchi Emecheta's novel *Double Yoke* (1982). The desire for occupying the centre of a structure is seen in the novel when the traditional concepts and values are contested by modernity. The traditional concepts of virginity, marriage, motherhood come in conflict with the modern educational opportunities, lifestyle and dressing, sexual freedom etc. Buchi Emecheta's novel suggests the idea that African men and women are torn between the tradition and modernity in a modern set up. However, it is the woman who suffers more in the conflict. The traditional patriarchs make it difficult for the survival of university aspirant women in the fast changing society of Nigeria. In the novel, Emecheta shows the exploitation of young women in modern Nigeria. The novel shows that both tradition and modernity play an important role in shaping and constructing of 'woman' in a male privileged society. Emecheta's characterization of her women characters shows that the modern woman is under pressure to achieve academic success in the male chauvinistic society. A careful study of Buchi Emecheta's novel highlights the importance of women in terms of development of modernity and protection of the tradition. The existence of women as an independent entity would turn them into good contributors of the society. In conclusion, Buchi Emecheta's novel shows that the negative impact of rigid patriarchy should be understood wholly in dealing with the conflict of tradition and modernity.

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