

Women Autobiographical Writing and the Alternate Self: Buchi Emecheta's *Head above Water*

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Abstract

Autobiography as a literary genre has been used by women writers over the years to contend the patriarchal construction of their identity. It provides for them an avenue for self-analysis, self-representation and self-reinvention. Drawing on Michel Foucault's the technologies of self as theoretical framework, the paper critically examines *Head above Water*, the autobiography of Buchi Emecheta. The aim is to investigate how Emecheta moves from the collective self to the alternate self in this text. The paper demonstrates that Emecheta resists self-negation which patriarchy and racism impose on her in her determination to project a unique self. The paper concludes that Emecheta successfully negotiates with patriarchal and racist discourses to create the alternate self in *Head above Water*.

Introduction

Snitow, Ann Barr submits:

When women try to picture excitement, the society offers them one vision, romance. When they try to imagine companionship, the society offers them one vision, male, sexual companionship; when women try to fantasize about success, the society offers them one vision, the power to attract a man. When women try to

fantasize about sex, the society offers them taboos on most of its imaginable expressions ...When women try to project a unique self, the society offers them very few attractive images. True completion for women is nearly always presented as social, domestic, sexual. (qtd in Zaidi & Qureshi 2)

Society gives applause to women who conform to the customs and conventions of self-negation it offers them. It condemns women to a collective identity as defined by patriarchy. Sheila Rowbotham affirms that “a woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is being defined *as woman*, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture (qtd in Friedman 75). In other words, *woman* as an independent being has no signification in the patriarchal culture. Her standing hinges on her marital, biological, cultural and psychological relationship with man. Realizing the socio-cultural and political determinants of their oppression, women writers begin to register their displeasure through voicing and one of the avenues opened to them is autobiographical writing. Lourdes Torres avers that “women’s autobiographies generally challenge the male-imposed construction of their identity” (278). Susan Stanford Friedman on her part argues that women’s “alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate self in the autobiographical act” (76). She argues further that “women’s autobiography comes alive as a literary tradition of self-creation...” (79). Shari Benstock affirms that women autobiographers write “to recapture the self” (145) that has been subsumed in collective identity. Thus, women’s autobiography “is not a mere description of the past, but representation of one’s life through self-analysis, self-representation and self-evaluation...” (Dadashova 233).

The woman autobiographer fights against patriarchy with its attendant oppressive values and gender prescriptions. Najia Asrar Zaidi & Misbah Bibi Qureshi posit that “autobiographical writings ... celebrate the essence of womanhood and womanliness” (2). They add that “the crucial concept in woman centered writings is truthful representation of female experience and identity” (4). Rowbottom submits that in the act of forming identity “women develop dual consciousness - the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription” (qtd in Friedman75). Friedman posits that women autobiographers create the alternate self in their works which “shatters the cultural hall of mirrors and breaks the silence imposed by male speech” (76). Women autobiographical writing can thus be understood “as an element of power, an instrument which individuals can use to become agents of change, whereby they construct their own discourses and so escape the common tendency to homogenize discourses” (Díaz 90).

Technologies of the Self

Michel Foucault conceptualizes four major types of technologies namely “(1) technologies of production, (2) technologies of sign systems, (3) technologies of power, and technologies of the self” (18). However, this study is premised on the fourth, the technologies of the self. He explains that “technologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18). Foucault is interested in the interaction between self and others and how an individual acts upon himself/*herself*, in the technology of self (19). He emphasizes on the relationship between self and others in the constitution of self as a subject because “we are the inheritors of a social morality

which seeks the rules for acceptable behavior in relations with others” (22). Rux Martin affirms that Foucault’s main concern in his technologies of the self is “a genealogy of how the self constituted itself as subject” (4). Isabel González Díaz comments that “the ‘technologies of the self’ that Foucault theorized would allow for individuals to behave, act, and think consciously, fashioning their own identities...” (90). Foucault clearly states in technologies of the self that taking care of oneself is linked to constant writing activity. He posits that “self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity...” (27-28). In Emecheta’s *Head Above Water*, self is the subject of the discourse; hence the choice of this framework.

Analysis

Díaz submits that “autobiography could be analyzed as one of the means that the individual can use in order to penetrate the discourse, reinvent his or her self and acquire that autonomy” (90). Accordingly, *Head Above Water* would be analyzed in terms of how the autobiographical subject, Emecheta, negotiates with the patriarchal and racist discourse to reinvent self and acquire autonomy using the following parameters: Emecheta as a girl-child, Emecheta as a wife, Emecheta as a single parent, Emecheta as a black woman in England and Emecheta as a writer.

Emecheta as a Girl-child

In Emecheta’s patriarchal milieu, the culturally assigned primary role for the woman is to be a mother of children especially male children. Florence O. Orabueze affirms that having male children is the signal achievement through which the woman can raise her head high and feel a real sense of fulfilment (108). So a woman bringing forth a baby-girl as the first child could be disappointing. For instance, Emecheta’s big mother, opened the matrix of her mother which was a disappointment to her parents; hence the name Nwakwaluzo, meaning “this child cleared the path for some

male children... she must have a male baby brother” (8). Emecheta is also a victim of this male-child syndrome. Her birth itself was problematic being born a premature, “a scrap of humanity” (10). Emecheta writes:

I had come to realize that my being a girl child had been a disappointment to my parents, I made a secret vow to myself...when I grew up I must visit the United Kingdom, to keep my father happy forever. That was going to be my payment to my family for daring to come into this world as a girl. (25)

Again, her education was to be put on hold after her father’s death because she is a girl child: “My father has just died and I was beginning to realize that my education was going to stop so that the money could be used to educate my brother...Jealousy fuelled my anger, and I set to work on his back with my teeth” (12). It is evident from her action against her brother that Emecheta began questioning gender-normative practices right from her childhood. Her mother allowed her “to stay in school for a while because she knew that some basic education would qualify her to be the wife of one of the new Nigerian elite” (25). But Emecheta makes a distinction between self as defined by patriarchy and not-self by making other plans to establish the not-self. Hear her: “I had other plans...I had to look after myself” (25). Accordingly, she secretly sat for a scholarship examination to the Methodist Girls’ High School, won it and went back to school to the disappointment of her mother. She explains: “If I had stayed at home I would have been forced to marry when I was only twelve” (25). She avoided going home on holidays so that she would not be forced into early marriage. She writes: I would stay in the dormitory with the cooks and stewards and read all the books I could lay my hands on” (25). Evidently,

Emecheta began to resist the identity that was imposed on her by the dominant culture early in life.

Emecheta as a Wife

At sixteen, Emecheta came under pressure to accept arranged marriage but she rejected it: "I refused all the men kept for me" (25). She married, Sylvester Onwordi, the man of her choice: "A dreamy, handsome local boy who, though older than myself, thought he too would make it big in the United Kingdom" (25). Soon after the marriage, she discovered to her chagrin that Sylvester had "a dangerously weak mind" (25). Sylvester did not only have a weak mind but was irresponsible and uncaring. For instance, she sent Sylvester thirty pounds to buy her a coat that she would wear on arrival in England "but he decided to spend the money to buy himself a suit" (28). He rather borrowed Mrs. Akinyemi's imitation fur for coat for his wife to wear on arrival (28). Emecheta used this fur until the owner embarrassed her by demanding for it. Again, he could not secure a befitting accommodation to welcome his family. He only got from a friend "a box-like room with just enough space for a bed and a chair" (28). Not only that, the day she was discharged from the hospital after the birth of their fourth child, she put several calls across to Sylvester to pick them up but he refused to pick the calls. She found her way home only to find him in bed with a woman friend" (30). She was very sad. She confesses: "I thought I would die of sorrow" (30) but she thought of her children, now four, and decided to live for them (30). However, she confided in Mrs Ola, a neighbor, that she "would leave Sylvester" (30). Mrs Ola in trying to dissuade her intimated her that most women put up with such husbands. Emecheta rejects this collective identity. She reasoned: "If a husband was going to be unfaithful, he should have the decency to do it outside and not on his wife's bed and especially not on the day that she was bringing home their new baby" (30).

Furthermore, Sylvester refused to get a job. Emecheta suggested to him to get one because she “was no longer prepared to go on working with four children while he sat at home, an eternal student who could hop in and out of bed with women of the house” (31). He eventually got one which brought so much joy to her. Hear her: “With this job of his, I told myself that I was going to make our marriage work: once he went out to work, his confidence would soar and he would learn to enjoy the new power he had over his family – the power to be the breadwinner, a feat which Sylvester had never achieved in all his life” (31). She told herself she was going to be an ideal housewife with all their meals ready on time (31). But soon after, Sylvester stopped working. He argued that he came to England to study and not to work while she stays at home simply to wash nappies, knit jumpers, and indulge in her lazy dreams (31). She showed him the manuscript of her first novel, *The Bride Price*, with excitement to prove to him that she was not whiling away her time. He burnt the manuscript saying “you don’t know much, so how can you write a story” (32). Then and then she knew that her “dream of being an ideal wife and mother was buried” (32). She walked out of the marriage at this juncture. Some relatives attempted a reconciliation between husband and wife but she wondered if she could cope with looking after Sylvester with her busy schedule. This is because Sylvester “was one of those people who wanted women to run around him while he sat down, too busy just being a man. That part of him had not changed” (85). She intimates the reader: “I had this unhealthy feeling that the independence I had achieved so far within our tradition was going to be taken away by a man who had never really changed” (88).

Notwithstanding, she accepted the reconciliation and advised him to get a job which he did. When he received his first salary, he said to his wife: “I have got my first pay. We now have to decide how much you will be contributing. I won’t mind feeding the boys, but the girls, well, you can feed and look after

them” (91). He continued: “You can afford to look after fifty percent of the kids and I will take care of the rest” (91). Shocked, she rejoins: “You mean I have to financially look after 2.5 children and you look after the other 2.5? So which of the children are we going to cut into two?”(91). Disgusted, she said to him: “Sylvester Nduka Onwordi, you have lost your second chance to show to the world that you could be a real father and husband. Please go out of my life forever...Don’t you ever come near me again” (91). She takes the initiative in ending the relationship not wanting to be pigeonholed in the traditional role of wifedom at all cost that patriarchy assigns to her. This recalls Benstock’s remark that in autobiography, “the writing subject is the one presumed to know (himself/*herself*), and this process of knowing is a process of differentiating himself/*herself* from others” (149).

Sylvester resigned from the job soon after the separation because he felt he was doing his wife and children a favor by paying alimony. He told Emecheta that he was not created simply to work his guts out for her comfort and that of their children (92). She intimates the reader that many of her Nigerian friends in whose personality culture is ingrained could put up with the excesses of the likes like Sylvester “simply to make a good marriage...” (97) but that she is not cut out for that. She rather wished to have a marriage in which husband and wife are companions and friends, “a marriage in which each member would perform his or her role, and in which neither role, least of all the kitchen one, was looked down upon” (97).

Emecheta as a Single Parent

African tradition does not prepare women for single parenthood. It encourages them to remain in marriage at all cost to forestall single parenthood. Emecheta explains that the fear of failing to achieve this ideal made her clutch at straws for a long time. However, the burning of her *Bride Price* decided her (32). She left Sylvester and became a single parent with four children. She got

pregnant with the fifth child when Sylvester raped her in her new apartment. The matter was taken to Clerkenwell Magistrates' Court and there Sylvester denied his children and recommended that Emecheta should have them all adopted because being a student, he did not wish to be saddled with five kids (33). He also said that they were never married; so Emecheta had no claim on him (33).

Her life as a single parent was not an easy one. She wonders: "How would the young mother who had been used to enlisting her own mother's help now cope with her demanding children by herself?" (103) She writes: "The lone parent is the bread-winner, the mother, the father, the counsellor, the comforter. I knew I had to shoulder the burden. It was one's cross, which one simply has to carry" (157). Nevertheless, there is no moment of regret in her being a single parent. She worked very hard to give her children good education knowing that for them to live and survive in England, "they would have to be a head higher than the average white boy or girl in a similar situation" (39). She is happy to be a mother. In fact, she feels that "people who deliberately choose not to have children do miss out on a great deal. Children have a way sometimes of multiplying one's happiness when they are young..." (78).

Emecheta also shares with the reader the discrimination she suffers as a lone parent. For instance, the landlord of the house she bought demanded more money from her as deposit because she is a single parent. She writes: "He reluctantly took £500 from me. He refused to take £50 from a single parent and I accepted that. I was used to the fact that single female parents paid more for everything they wanted, because society thinks that we are a greater risk than our male counterparts" (194). Some of her Nigerian married women friends like Mrs. Olufunwa also wanted to daub her with the stigma of a single parent which she rejected. They feel that a single woman does not deserve a fine house like the one she bought. She writes:

Mrs Olufunwa preferred our house to the one they had bought because ours was a whole 300 pounds cheaper. I sensed that she was not very pleased with my getting the house at all. She was like most of my married women friends, who felt that single women should not be able to afford such things: they should be the 'preserve' of women who stuck to and survived in their marriages. It does not matter how dead or superficial such marriages are, many women feel that tangible buys like houses should be their reward for seeing it through. Females like me who, though not by choice, are left to raise children single-handed, should never contemplate buying a house. This was one of my reasons for shying away from married Nigerian women. (207)

Even here, Emecheta creates her alternate self. She refuses to be discouraged by the tradition- influenced attitude of other black women.

Emecheta as a Black Woman in England

Emecheta was about eighteen years old, the mother of two babies, Chiedu and Ik when she arrived England. Her first impression on arrival was very poor. She almost regretted selling all her belongings to be able to make it. Hear her: "England gave me a cold welcome...I felt like walking into the inside of a grave. I could see nothing but masses of grey, filth, and more grey, yet something was telling me that it was too late" (26-27).

Emecheta contends with racism in all its forms in England. She insists upon her own singularity. She writes: "I started letting people know that although I was black, I still had some education. I refused to consider any inferior flats and consequently was given one of the best..." (40). Again, she

rejects the job her fellow black women reserved for her at a shirt factory in Camden Town which they consider befitting for a black woman. She comments: "Working in a shirt factory would for me have been a damaging emotional blow" (28). She had already decided on a profession and started taking correspondence courses on British Librarianship before she arrived England. She was determined to make it in England: "I must make it here or perish and I was not going to allow myself to perish because if I did, who was going to look after the babies I brought..." (26). Accordingly, Emecheta succeeds in getting a first class job as a librarian at North Finchley Library in the face of racism and sexism. She lives above the stereotypical lifestyle of black women in England.

Not only that, while living at Regent's Park, she said to her social worker: "You know Carol, one day I am going to buy a house of my very own and I shall leave this unfriendly place" (45). Carol laughed and retorted: "We all have dreams, don't we?" (45). Emecheta reiterated: "I am going to buy a house – I don't know when. But when I move from this place it is going to be into a house which I will be buying" (46). Carol asked her how she would raise money to buy a house. She told her that she was going to be a writer. This again is unimaginable to Carol. Emecheta comments: "I could hear the tone of her voice saying that my making a living from such a profession as writing was a dream" (46). But Emecheta refused to be discouraged in spite of Carol's racist attitude. She consoles herself: "I'm still a long way to forty. I'm quite sure big Mother in Ibuza did not start telling her stories before she was that age" (46). She eventually bought a house on mortgage in Haringey: "I was moving into Haringey, one of those London boroughs with high rates" (208). She shares with the reader: "To own my own home was a feat which my parents had never achieved in Lagos... Now I was moving into one that would be mine" (208). Here again, Emecheta registers her defiant self. Roger A. Berger contends that "in a real sense, a

major climax of the text occurs when Emecheta purchases her own home, signifying that she had not only entered the British middle class but also achieved a kind of British identity” (n.p). These are her own words: “As for my survival for the past twenty years in England, from when I was a little over twenty years, dragging four cold and dripping babies with me and pregnant with a fifth one...my keeping my head above water in this indifferent society...is a miracle” (5).

Emecheta as a Writer

Emecheta dreamt to be a writer right from when she was in the secondary school. Hear her:

I so wish to be a story teller, like our mother Ogbueyin and her friends at home in Ibusa. Unlike them I would not have to sit by the moonlight, because I was born in an age of electricity...I have learned to use new tools for the same art. Now I know a new language, the language of Miss Humble and the rest of them... (22)

So when Miss Humble, one of her teachers at the Methodists Girls’ High School, asked her, “Florence, Florence Emecheta, what are you going to do when you leave here?” (21) She cuts in: “A writer, Miss humble” (21). Miss Humble was shocked at her audacity. Her response was “pride goeth before a fall” (21) and commanded Emecheta to go to the chapel immediately and “pray for God’s forgiveness” (21) for daring to tread where only the White can tread. Miss Humble in the vein of Carol saw Emecheta’s ambition as inordinate because she feels that Emecheta as a black is not qualified to use the white man’s language. Emecheta comments: “Miss Humble probably felt that her language was too good for the likes of me to use as a means of expression” (22). But she was not discouraged. She writes:

Sometimes it is very good to meet people like Carol, Miss Humble and Sylvester. Such people were particularly good for me...because one way to set my mind on achieving something was for another person to tell me that I could not do it. I would then put all my thoughts into it, I would pray for it and go out for it, in search of the miracle. And when I saw the miracle flying about, I would grab it like Jacob grabbed Jehovah... (46)

This recalls Mary G. Mason's argument that many women's autobiographers create the self by exploring their relationship with others which help them "to discover and delineate a self and to tell the story of that self even as it was being uncovered and coming into existence" (323). This is reminiscent of Domna Stanton's submission that "some feminist critics defined the personal in women's autobiographies as a primary emphasis on the relation of the self to others" (138). Emecheta is neither discouraged by Miss Humble's poor remarks neither is she discouraged by the burning of the manuscript of her brain child, *The Bride Price*, by Sylvester. Also, she refuses to be intimidated by the fact that she is venturing into a male domain. She remarks: "The world especially, the African's world, still regards serious writing as a masculine preserve" (61). Emecheta's doggedness in differentiating herself from the collective identity gives credence to Friedman's submission that "women's sense of collective identity, however, is not only negative. It can be a source of strength and transformation" (75).

Whenever she shelved books at the library where she worked, especially those by authors who had written many, she would stand back and tell herself that one day, just one day, my books would be among them (70). Emecheta pursued her dream of becoming a writer to a successful end. But this did not come without challenges. Initially her manuscripts were rejected out of

prejudice. She writes: "I sometimes think that I was one of the unluckiest would-be authors that ever lived – I spent almost every week of 1970 and 1971 trying to persuade publishers to read my work...I soon got used to the sound of returned manuscripts thudding onto the lino-covered floor of my council flat" (63). Nevertheless, she persisted and published "more than ten books" (1) thereby presenting herself as a subject even in this male-dominated field. Berger confirms that through pluck and persistence, Emecheta "rises from humble origins to become a successful writer and homeowner in London, an example of heroic triumphalism" (n.p).

Conclusion

Foucault argues:

In order for a man or woman to be constituted as a subject, he or she must first be divided from the totality of the world, or the totality of the social body. For a "me" to emerge, a distinction must be made between the "me" and the "not-me." The boundaries of the self are those lines that divide the self from all that which is not the self, which is beyond the self. The first, and essential move in the constitution of the self is division. (106)

This is the story of Emecheta which is being dramatized in this paper. Emecheta lays before her readers the chronicle of the distinction between the "me" and the "not-me" in *Head Above Water*. She resists the subjectivity which patriarchy and racism impose on her in her determination for the 'me' to emerge. She asserts in her autobiography: "I am just me, Buchi Emecheta" (216). Berger affirms that Emecheta "born into poverty in Lagos, she is able to overcome patriarchal Igbo expectations, racist elementary teachers from England, a useless, parasitical husband,

and a disappointedly racist/sexist England to keep her “head above water; and survive and prosper in 1960s and 1970s London” (n.p). The autobiographical subject, Emecheta, dramatizes her alternate self by dividing the self from all that which is not the self to use Foucault’s words in her interaction with patriarchy and racism.

From the foregoing, it is evident that Emecheta’s *Head Above Water* faults George Gusdorf’s concept of autobiography which is based on the model of self that is Western and individualistic. He contends that “autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not properly speaking exist” (qtd in Friedman 72). For Gusdorf, the consciousness of self upon which autobiography is premised is the sense of the “isolated being”...Man must be an island unto himself. Then and then is autobiography possible” (qtd in Friedman 72-73). Gusdorf lays emphasis on individualism as a cultural precondition for autobiographical writing which feminists such as Rowbotham, Friedman and Chodorow contend with. Friedman for example argues that “the individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities” (72). The role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of Emecheta is evident in her autobiography which puts to test Gusdorf’s theory. Emecheta’s autobiography rather confirms Foucault’s submission:

This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection . . . the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the

"marks" that characterize him and make him a case
(qtd in Gutman 99) .

All in all, what Rowbotham says of women autobiographers is true of Emecheta. Rowbotham asserts that women have "shattered the distorting identities imposed by culture and left "the sign" of their "presence" in their autobiographical writings (qtd in Friedman 79). Indeed, Emecheta shatters the distorting identities imposed on her by culture. She successfully negotiates with patriarchal and racist discourses to create the alternate self in *Head above Water*.

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