

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DECODING FEMALE RESISTANCE IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *KEHINDE*

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ABSTRACT

As a black woman writer, Buchi Emecheta is the voice of explicit protest against all forms of oppression that has subdued African women for a long time. Her works reconstruct the myriad experiences of the African women in Africa and elsewhere. She examines the dynamics of power that govern the relationship between men and women in her novels. In *Kehinde* (1994), Buchi Emecheta examines how women survive patriarchy through covert subversive acts. The novel has strong female characters who have found a way to deal with the patriarchal constraints and use it to their advantage. *Kehinde* presents the predicament of an African woman who relinquishes a job in London to join her husband in Africa where she finds herself relegated to the background in spite of being the Senior wife. She faces the challenge of assimilating herself into the tradition at the same time trying to hold on to her identity as an independent woman. This paper is an attempt to read *Kehinde* as a text that celebrates women's ability to change the status quo and cause a shift in the balance of power. At the same time, the analysis of the text exposes the victimization of women on the basis of prescribed roles and restrictive patriarchal norms. A study of the text will reveal how the subordination of women is related to control over her sexuality, reproductive rights etc.

Key words: patriarchy, the female body, resistance, African

In order to understand and explore the subject of women's subordination, it is pertinent that one looks at the dynamics of power that govern the relationship between men and women. Kate Millet calls it "sexual politics", her definition of politics being that of a "power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another"(2000:23). The female body becomes the site where sexual politics are played out because it is constantly under pressure to conform and submit to prescribed social

and cultural norms. The female body is considered as a procreating device and a source of sexual pleasure. Here it would be significant to mention Simone de Beauvoir's argument regarding the body, she writes that man "thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of a woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it" (1997:15). This suggests the man takes immense pride in his body while considering the body of a

woman as a burden she has to live with. Man being the measure of all things, women's body is perceived as a lack that can hope for perfection or completion only in its relation to men. Ketu Katrak reiterates this alienation from their own body saying that women, "experience self-exile, a sense of not belonging to themselves." (2006:158). The subordination of women is related to control over her sexuality, reproductive rights, etc. Female resistance to the lack of self-determination over their own bodies form an important aspect of the African feminist struggle.

This paper examines Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994), as an account of female resistance to disempowerment. It analyses how the protagonist navigates her life within the patriarchal sanctioned space while covertly resisting it. The modern African women experience social issues fraught with contradictions. Their dilemma is that of how to reconcile the modern self while trying to stay true to their traditional roots. Ato Quayson's arguments reflect this conundrum. He writes, "women's existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedom without severe sacrifices or compromise" (2007:585). Kehinde, finds herself caught in a delicate balancing act between showing respect for tradition while trying to forge an identity of her own. As an African feminist writer, Emecheta portrays how the balance of power is tilted towards men and how this affects the life of women. A study of this novel by Buchi Emecheta reveals the subtle ways in which women undertake acts of subversion and resistance, discreetly disrupting the status quo and shifting the balance of power in their favour. In the struggle for power, women are not just "points of application" but "vehicles of power" (1980:98). To borrow from Foucault analysis, power here is not a negative or an oppressive force, but it is a positive force that give rise to forms of resistance.

Emecheta's heroine in this novel navigates her life within the patriarchally sanctioned space while covertly resisting it. Kehinde, the protagonist of the novel with the same name is an educated Nigerian woman settled with her family in London. The London home represents a space where Kehinde could make her voice heard and her husband Albert

treats her as a companion. But she was well aware that in doing this he was just being practical and diplomatic. The house was in her name and she earns more than Albert. In spite of all this, a thousand miles away from home, Kehinde could feel the traditional Patriarchal force looming over her life in the form of letters from Albert sisters urging him to come home. In fact, this is further substantiated by Albert's desire to give up life in London and move back to Nigeria. The concept of home is very different for Kehinde and Albert. Kehinde dreams about home are confused, she says, "I haven't a clear vision what I am suppose to be looking for there" (22). Albert on the other hand longs for the Nigeria, where he could assert his maleness and power as the man of the house. Albert conversation with his colleague Prabhu exposes his real reason for wanting to go home "But I want to go back to the way of life my father had, a life of comparative ease for men, where men were men and women were women." (35). Kehinde on the other hand was aware that "behind the veneer of westernisation, the traditional Igbo man was alive and strong, awaiting an opportunity to reclaim his birthright" (35). Kehinde feels threatened by patriarchal discourses which continually disempowered her.

Albert's reaction to Kehinde's pregnancy serves as an example of male chauvinism. The body of the women becomes the sites where power politics is played out. "...convenient vehicles which, when they took on an inconvenient burden, could be emptied of it by the same means" (17). This affirms how Albert wanted the power and privilege that would be his at home in Nigeria but he doesn't think twice about rejection a part of his culture when it inconveniences him. He justifies himself, saying, "I know abortion is wrong, but we are in a strange land, where you do things contrary to your culture" (15). Tradition often tilts the balance of power in the favour of men perpetuating "women's subordinate status while ensuring male privilege" (2006:8). The abortion was very painful, but Kehinde had to let Albert have his way so that his dream of going home would not be jeopardised. But she was not ready to play the victim; she decided to have her tubes tied in spite of Albert's protest. She claimed control over her body by doing that. The abortion

changes the dynamics of their relationship forever. The body which underwent a distortion was hers, Kehinde realises that he could never feel what she had felt. On their journey home, she looked at him and realises “He had nothing to offer her”(33).

Kehinde’s eagerness to please Albert only reiterates how she is continually obliged to seek his approval since he is the man in the house. Here it would be significant to mention the Foucault concept of the Panoptican surveillance which is relevant in the study of how a woman sense of self and her worldview is determined by patriarchy. Sandra Lee Bartky in her essay *Foucault, Femininity and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power* enunciates this point, she writes, “In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement” (1998:34). Her treatment of Mary Elikwu also reveals how her attitude is determined by the patriarchal society where a single woman is treated as an outsider and something of a fluke, a curiosity and a challenge (38). Kehinde’s sense of worth and identity comes from being Albert’s wife and unwittingly she conforms to the idea that a woman without a husband is incomplete no matter how successful she may be. In spite of having been through an excruciating experience, Kehinde went all out to give Albert a great farewell party, but Albert failed to appreciate her effort. He was too engrossed in having his needs fulfilled.

Left alone to sell off the house in London, Kehinde realises that without Albert, she was “half-person”. Quitting her well-paying job at the bank, she returned to Nigeria. Kehinde soon realises that things were very different in Nigeria. Had it not been for, Ifewinya, her sister, Kehinde would have made a complete fool of herself. It was Ifewinya who gently broke the news about Albert’s new wife Rike. Ifewinya has learnt the tools of surviving in an increasingly oppressive patriarchal culture. Her pretence of being a simple-minded older woman was a mask she had worn for eighteen years (112). She guides Kehinde, helping her to manoeuvre the challenging terrain of the African patriarchal culture. Sisterhood can be considered as another form of covert female resistance. It is an important aspect of African feminism. Relegated to the margin in the

presence of the new wife and Albert’s imposing sisters, Kehinde decides to go back to London. It was Mariammo, her best friend who came to her rescue by sending her the fare. Ifewinya was the only person to accompany her to the airport. As tradition dictates, she considers it her duty as an elder sister to ask Kehinde not to go. But once Ifewinya realises that Kehinde would not change her mind, she encourages her to take the step even suggesting that Kehinde takes another man. Kehinde was surprised to see this side of her sister’s persona, “Kehinde glimpsed the spirit trapped behind the veneer of tradition.” (106). Brenda Berrian commenting on this aspect writes, “with gratefulness, Kehinde counts her riches because she has her biological sister, her spirit twin and an adopted sister who all provide her with support and understanding” (1996:175). The friendship and loyalty of these women gave Kehinde the strength to fight back and to forge her own destiny. In the course of the novel, we learn that as a young girl, Kehinde was quite tenacious when it comes to holding on to her identity. Though her aunt tried to protect her from herself, keeping from Kehinde the story of her birth, Kehinde knew she was born one set of a twin. After Albert left for Nigeria, Kehinde alone in London was increasingly realising that she would have to look within for strength, the inner voice which she attribute to her twin sister Taiwo.

Back in London, the first thing Kehinde did was to lay claim on the London house, wrenching the for sale sign from the ground, defiantly exclaiming “This house is mine” (108). The London home symbolises an assertion of her identity. Kehinde decides to quit being the victim and instead take charge as the victor. She chose to empower herself further through education. Kehinde got herself a university degree while supplementing her income working at a hotel. It was at the hotel that Kehinde encountered another debilitating patriarchal and colonial oppression. A sheikh, whose wife Kehinde has been tutoring demanded to see what a black woman looked like. This echoes an argument raised by Bell Hooks in *Ain’t I A Woman*, where she talks about the devaluation of the black woman’s worth perpetuated by stereotypes regarding her sexuality (1983). Kehinde as a black woman had to fight not only patriarchal constraints but also racism. She

refused to be cowed down, eventhough she runs the risks of losing her job. She walked out of that incapacitating situation telling herself that, "The sheikh might want to see what a black woman's body looked like, but that body was not going to be hers"(132)

The first time Kehinde reclaim her body was when she took control over her reproductive rights by getting her tubes tied after the abortion. The second time was it was in Nigeria when she pushed Albert away when he sneak into bed to claim his sexual rights. Taking a cue from Albert, who doesn't think twice about taking another woman, Kehinde went on to have a physical relationship with her tenant Mr.Gibson in London. She simply calls it the 'joys of polygamy'(106). She tells Joshua, her son, "I'm still his wife, if I want to be, and I'm still your mother. It doesn't change anything."(138). This was something very new for Joshua, who was bought up to consider mothers as all sacrificing and submissive. Goaded by his father, Joshua even went to the court trying to get his mother to transfer the house in his name. This is again symbolic of how the patriarchy tries to impose prescribed cultural roles for women, trying to coerce Kehinde into submission. Brenda Berrian aptly remarks, "Now, Albert (indirectly) and their son (directly) are jolted awake when they confront a wife/mother who lays claim to her property and rights on her turf" (178). Kehinde's growth as a woman can also be seen in how she made a point to reconnect with women like Mary Elikwu. She began to understand and appreciate a woman daring to take a stand, leaving her violent husband and bringing up her children by herself.

Women like Kehinde, Mary Elikwu and Ifewinya found a way to deal with the patriarchal constraints and use it to their advantage. Power has shifted from the hands of patriarchy into the hands of these women through subversive acts. Ketu Katrak commenting on this paradigm shift writes, "Female covert resistances are undertaken with self consciousness and remarkable creativity that decides to take risks and confront domination selectively and strategically in the interest of self preservation" (2006:3) Kehinde bargained for her right to assert her identity. Redefining tradition, Kehinde disarms it through her covert acts of resistance, triumphing over it at the end.

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