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Buchi Emecheta, laughter and silence: changes in the concepts “woman”, “wife” and “mother”

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Summary

As women must speak or write from within an androcentric language, the possibilities for loosening the hold of concepts imposed by and expressed in that language are important to feminists. Emecheta's novels show that the dominance of language may be subverted by the shared laughter of women or by their chosen silence.

Opsomming

Aangesien vroue praat of skryf vanuit 'n androsentriese taal, is die moontlikheid om los te kom uit die houvas van konsepte wat deur daardie taal afgedwing of uitgedruk word, belangrik vir feministe. Emecheta se romans toon dat die oorheersing van taal ondermyn kan word deur die gedeelde gelag van vrouens of deur hulle keuse vir stilte.

In the three novels, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, in which Buchi Emecheta explores the reality of women's lives in Nigeria in the early decades of this century, each protagonist's story ends in defeat. Although these novels are all written from a post-tribal perspective, the flavour of these defeats varies because the protagonists' capacities are progressively enlarged over the three novels. Emecheta's central figure changes from being unaware of the real nature of her struggles and defeat to having a much fuller consciousness of the meaning of what is happening. Thus when the first protagonist, Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*, dies in childbirth having defied her family in marrying Chike, the *osu* (descended from slaves) man of her choice, she is quite unaware that her death will be understood by her community as reinforcing the “superstition” she had “unknowingly set out to eradicate” (1978: 168): the belief that unless a girl accepts the husband her family chooses and unless the bride price is paid, she will not live to enjoy children. In *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta finds the strength of will to flee from slavery and return to her childhood village. Having managed this degree of choice, she finds that once again she must flee, this time to Lagos, in order to be able to marry Jacob rather than the illiterate farmer, Adim, who is favoured by her uncle. Her story ends when Jacob repays the price which Ma Palagada had originally given for Ojebeta when she was sold into slavery. Ojebeta kneels in simple gratitude to her husband, saying, “Thank you my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master” (1979: 190). Although the ironies of her situation reach Ojebeta's lips, she is still so immersed in her people's traditions that she does not hear what she has said. It is left to a wry narrative comment to recognise that “Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters” (1979: 190).

In *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta gives her protagonist a much greater capacity to comprehend the ironies in the “joy” of the title. In Lagos, as Nnu

Ego struggles to meet the many new demands made on her (that she take responsibility for feeding, clothing, housing and educating her children), her concept of herself as woman, wife and mother begins to change. She gains considerable autonomy in her actions although she cannot always bring her new capacities to full, conscious recognition. This is why, when asked in court to define the nature of the economic responsibilities she has shouldered, she is capable only of restating the traditional, tribal basis of her marriage:

Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pays. (1980: 217)

The court erupts in laughter. Such a sign of the colonising power's incomprehension and strange system of justice is galling to Nnu Ego, but it is not here that her defeat lies. In raising her children in the belief that her sons must be educated in Western fashion if they are to rise in the new urban world, Nnu Ego does not see that the education she struggles to provide will in fact alienate her sons from her. So, in late middle age, she is left longing for one word of recognition from her sons who are studying in America. Finally, she dies defeated by their neglect. It takes her death to earn Nnu Ego her sons' attention; they return to give her the "noisiest and most costly second burial Ibuza had ever seen" (1980: 224). They clearly do not recognise their part in her lonely death for they also build "a shrine . . . in her name so that her grandchildren could appeal to her should they be barren" (1980: 224). When Nnu Ego does "not answer prayers for children", her silence must be read not as a complaint, but as a rebuke. Although she has had to accept the fact that "parents get only reflected glory from their children nowadays" (1980: 213) and that they will not provide the direct rewards she had once expected, this lesson does not seem to extend to her sons' understanding of what they have required of her. Their final tribute, which demands that she sustain the old terms of bountiful maternity, terms which in her own life have been forcibly changed, contains such contradictions that her response is, properly, silence. It is the silence of refusal. By giving this degree of understanding and judgement to her third protagonist, Buchi Emecheta changes her project from a narrative description, made from an external and more knowledgeable perspective on women's real situation (1), to a narrative exploration, made from within, of a woman's consciousness. Thus the sequence culminates in the creation of a woman with the capacity to respond to a new world, to reconceptualise herself in it and to express her judgement on it. This means that the silence with which all three novels end changes from being that of incomprehending defeat to that of chosen refusal. At the end of *The Bride Price*, Akunna's incomprehension and silence, because it is not part of her consciousness, establishes an unbridged gap between reader and character. This gap is narrowed in *The Slave Girl* and virtually closed in *The Joys of Motherhood*. There, silence is not solely a condition to be recognised by the reader but is one that has been incorporated into experience as it is registered by the character herself. At times in this narrative, silence does represent incompre-

hension, but this changes until finally silence becomes Nnu Ego's chosen response. A refusal to use her traditional power has become Nnu Ego's most appropriate means of self-expression and, besides its coming from her own judgement, it represents the view that the reader is asked to reach.

In this progression, silence changes its narrative functioning from being the element which surrounds the protagonist and which the reader, aided by narrative comment, must interpret, to being an aspect of the protagonist's own language. Nnu Ego is not silenced, but silent. Her silenced forbears can be seen as examples of what Tillie Olsen, in her study of women's creativity, calls "the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot" (1980: 6) and their stories illustrate why Adrienne Rich, echoed since by many feminist scholars, said that the "entire history of women's struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over" (1980: 11). But the feminist must come to a different conclusion about Nnu Ego's silence, one that draws in the current debate about women and language.

When Nnu Ego moves from her Ibo village, Ibuza, to Lagos, she has literally to learn a new language, that of the city, which is Yoruba; but what is crucial in her move is not the new set of sounds but the new concepts operative in urban life which she has to learn. These entail the Western ways that the colonisers have imposed as well as the new meanings the traditional terms have acquired in the changed context. The changes which Nnu Ego has to manage involve changes in belief and attitude, in thought and emotional patterns, and they manifest themselves primarily in language. For this reason, discussion of Nnu Ego's language refers to her whole mind, and the particular examples which illustrate the complexity of the process of change are the shifts which occur in her own understanding and use of the concepts "woman", "wife" and "mother". It is helpful to see that in her move to Lagos, Nnu Ego is, once again, experiencing entry into what Julia Kristeva calls "the symbolic" (1974: 2), a term for social life and its language which, following Lacan, she uses when theorising, by exploring the psychology of the process of acquiring language, the way in which language is an imprisoning as well as an enabling tool. Nnu Ego's first entry into the symbolic was her childhood immersion in tribal ways and, if the difference between it and her later encounter with a new language in Lagos is schematised, its presentation can be seen to establish the conditions of having a language at all – it shapes as well as expresses our being. By contrast, her learning the concepts she needs for life in Lagos, her second entry, enables the reader to recognise, in addition to the way that the general constraints of language work, the specific limitations that the androcentricity of language imposes on women. Thus, the second entry supplies what Ruthven asks for: a demonstration that "language is much more of a prison-house for women than it is for men" (1984: 59).

Aku-nna and Ojebeta, Nnu Ego's silenced forbears, show in detail what the first stage of her story also conveys: that however much of a prison-house language may be, it is the means by which men and women constitute themselves in their world and, more importantly, by which they gain reflective access to their experiences of that constituted world. In the second stage of her story, as she replaces old meanings with new ones, Nnu Ego is facing

the specific difficulties of a woman who, traditionally the silent, passive and obedient user of language, has to work out for herself, rather than simply receive, the man-made concepts of her new world. In her tribal life, the acquisition of language had been a simpler matter of absorbing the attitudes and cultural expectations which govern the uses of speech; once in Lagos, Nnu Ego, who is left alone to fend for her children for much of the time, has to replace one set of concepts with another. To do this she has to depend on her own resources in identifying, understanding and then using the concepts she needs to survive. Being largely unaided, she is quite clearly developing her own language. Thus each time that her husband returns and challenges her practices, asserting his attitudes and expectations and thereby destroying what Nnu Ego has created, he demonstrates unusually explicitly the way in which women are dominated, and even oppressed, by male uses of language. The particular value of this second entry into the symbolic for feminists is that Nnu Ego's interactions with the new language she has to absorb can be seen, they are explicit rather than the speculative reconstruction of how a woman first acquires language which theorists like Kristeva have put forward.

The Joys of Motherhood is structured so that the stages of Nnu Ego's self-instruction are clearly signposted. The major division is between her tribal life, in which she finds no reason to question the concepts and behaviours that her ancestral language has taught her, and her urban life. In this latter section, the narrative also demarcates very clearly the steps by which Nnu Ego comes to awareness of her task, learns to articulate her problems and then manages to act on her circumstances.

For the pre-urban stage, before Nnu Ego's consciousness can be used by the narration, the questioning slant with which it must be seen is set up by the opening scene – Nnu Ego's attempted suicide in Lagos. As the narrative proceeds to a substantial retrospective presentation of tribal life without explaining what has led to her attempt, the wish for death becomes an enigma through which events in these chapters must be read. In them, Emecheta establishes both the strengths and weaknesses of Nnu Ego's attitudes (from an urban point of view) as they are constituted in the language of tribal custom. A major constituent of these is the position of Ona, Nnu Ego's mother. She is both a spirited beauty, beloved of Agbadi, and the daughter through whom her own father, Obi Umunna, hopes to acquire the male heir he so desperately wants. It is clear that Ona has been allowed to retain her independent status as Agbadi's lover, rather than becoming one of his wives, not because her own wishes are being respected but because her remaining part of her father's household gives him a claim on any offspring. Either way, as wife or lover, Ona is a man's possession and her chief function is to bear male children.

Nnu Ego absorbs the tribal view of womanhood completely, so much so that she is almost destroyed by her own failure to bear children when she marries. When her husband repudiates her, she shares his view of her worthlessness; when she has recovered some of her vitality in her father's household, his decision that she should try marriage again, this time in Lagos, clearly suits her mentality. Thus, by the time the narration catches up with the

opening event, the culture which has produced Nnu Ego is known to the reader as a coherent way of life which functions effectively in given circumstances. But the reader also knows from within the picture of that culture, and long before the protagonist herself, the sources of the strains and contradictions that will burden Nnu Ego as she has to learn the language of Lagos.

It is after her first baby's sudden death (the cause of her attempted suicide) that Nnu Ego is called on to make her first conscious effort to understand her plight. This involves her in finding the new features of her language which will loosen the hold over her of her tribal concepts. Previously, once she had borne Nnaife's son, her tribal view of motherhood and the importance of male children had been her means of accepting life in Lagos with her pot-bellied little laundryman husband. But when her child dies, she needs another basis for acceptance. Emecheta does not suggest that the effort by which Nnu Ego begins to find this is one of great and deliberate travail, for she shows the first, crucial break with tradition coming through the easy, shared laughter of two friends as they discuss their husbands:

"... and I worry that people may think I am mad. Even Nnaife calls me a mad woman sometimes."

Ato laughed again, this time really startling Nnu Ego who had not heard such laughter for a very long time. "He can talk, that fat fufu dough of a man. If he calls you mad, tell him to look in the mirror!"

Nnu Ego could not help laughing almost as loudly as her friend. "No, he is a man, and you know men are never ugly."

"I know," Ato confirmed. She became serious again. "Let him sleep with you. Please don't let your people down." She started to laugh again. "Even if you don't find him a good lover because of his round stomach, you may find him loving. Many men can make love and give babies easily but cannot love."

"I know, loving and caring are more difficult for our men. But Nnaife is very loving; you see, he copies the white people he works for. He is not bad in the other way, too . . . I just did not know him before – no, I don't mean that, I didn't dream I would end up marrying a man like him."

"Neither did I dream of marrying a man who would stay away months at a time. You know something, they say men who work on the ships have mistresses wherever they land."

"Oh!" Nnu Ego exclaimed, covering her mouth. "Your husband would never do a thing like that." (1980: 75)

Laughter is the vital para-linguistic act which releases Nnu Ego into her first step towards employing the new concepts her situation demands. The friends' laughter is directed at a male maxim, "men are never ugly", that is characteristic of what Mary Jacobus sees as the reductive, generalised rules by which male dominance is "maximised" and maintained (1982: 52). It is also an example of the ways in which members of a "muted group" can achieve communication that is disruptive of reigning orthodoxies while remaining just within the bounds of conventional language. "Muted" is the term which Elaine Showalter (1982: 30) takes up to describe how women's way of perceiving the world can, although it is constituted within and by the language of the dominant (male) group, assert itself with some small degree of indepen-

dence. Following Showalter's suggestions, the laughter with which Nnu Ego invokes the tribal maxim can be seen to come from that small, peripheral area of language that is free from male control, and as being able to create a gap between her and that maxim. Her laughter, inserting a new register of detachment into her language, enables her to look afresh at the customs which have hitherto ruled her life. From the other side of the gap it creates, she can turn to her own, unique experience, "Nnaife is very loving", for guidance and so begin the process of adaptation. In this crossing over, she is guided by Ato's account of what she has had to learn in marriage to a sailor, but it is also clear that Ato goes too quickly for Nnu Ego who is left "covering her mouth" as though their words are suddenly too powerful and must be checked.

By now, the three concepts which Nnu Ego has to re-examine and which must take on new meaning in her life, those of "woman" (in the sense of an individual unit in society), "wife" and "mother" are entering Nnu Ego's active re-consideration. Emecheta takes care to show that while her protagonist is reconstituting one of these notions, she often has to manage this by clinging for support to the traditional form of the others. The first of these concepts to come under attack during Nnu Ego's fresh start with Nnaife, is that of "woman" when she finds that economic responsibility for her family falls entirely on her. When Nnaife goes to Fernando Po for work, Nnu Ego is turned out of their yard because the army requires the buildings. Alone and penniless, having never before handled money, she has to find shelter, as well as food for herself and two children. During these struggles, Ibuza, its ways and its values, remains Nnu Ego's consciously invoked support; but at the same time she is absorbing the new powers taught her by necessity. In particular her economic responsibilities are teaching her self-reliance and the vocabulary associated with it begins to accrue to her. With the narrative observation that, "having made up her mind, she walked with confidence carrying her day's purchases on her head" (1980: 109), it is clear that this "confidence" is locatable both as an external observation and as a new element in Nnu Ego's own language about herself. In comparison with an earlier picture of her mother's walk, which is the intuitive blending of person and environment, Nnu Ego's movements begin to speak of the power to separate oneself from one's world so as to act on it. That these powers represent a very modest change at this stage, is evident when Nnaife's unexpected return immediately strips his wife of all her newly found powers of decision-making.

The first time that Nnu Ego consciously registers that tribal attitudes are not going to sustain her in Lagos comes shortly after Nnaife's return. Here Emecheta uses coincidence to draw attention to the processes of change and to establish that Nnu Ego's emergent language will be shaped by a reaction against tribal customs as well as by response to urban demands. On the day that Nnaife gets a permanent job with the Lagos railways, the news of his elder brother's death arrives. This means that Nnaife inherits his wives. Nnaife's becoming the stable breadwinner dislodges Nnu Ego from the economic role within which she has begun to think of herself; the arrival of Adaku,

an inherited wife, also dislodges her – this time from the wifely role within which she has always thought of herself. As her tribal self is willing to take on the new role of senior wife, Nnu Ego cannot at first understand why Adaku's presence disturbs her so much. Once she realises that it is because Ibuza traditions do not translate to Lagos, she sees, for the first time, that the old world is not simply preferable to the new.

Nnu Ego, as the daughter of a tribal chief, is a deeply conservative woman and for some time she finds that the two codes within which she lives are simply antagonistic, they are too contradictory for her to live between them. Deadlock is broken when Adaku rebels against Nnaife and persuades Nnu Ego to join her in refusing to cook for him until he gives them more of his money. Their rebellion fails but it does force Nnu Ego to analyse more vigorously her discontent.

On her way back to their room, it occurred to Nnu Ego that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned in her role as the senior wife. She was not even expected to demand more money for her family; that was considered below the standard expected of a woman in her position. It was not fair, she felt, the way men cleverly used a woman's sense of responsibility to actually enslave her It seemed that all she had inherited from her agrarian background was the responsibility and none of the booty. Well, even though she had now given in and admitted defeat, she was going to point this out to Nnaife that very evening when she came home from work. With that final decision, confidence sprang inside her like water from below the ground and seemed to wash away her gloomy thoughts with its clear, sparkling gush. (1980: 137)

However painful her position, Nnu Ego is no longer suspended between two antipathetic languages; something new is emerging and this time the springing of "confidence" is wholly within her own conscious recognitions.

As Nnaife is, that very day, conscripted into the army and so does not return home to hear his wife's resolve, Emecheta is clearly using coincidence to do more than indicate the tricks that life can play on someone who is battling through to a new epistemological basis. Nnu Ego's analysis is made in solitude and goes unheard; in a larger sense, nothing of the resolution that she achieves is ever heard by anyone. Emecheta seems to be drawing attention to the view that within the second, male language of the city, into which her protagonist is now moving, the private satisfactions of clarity and resolve are all that is in prospect: the give and take of dialogue, which would demand some recognition of the woman's language, is not available. The silence which greets Nnu Ego's recognition of the extent of the change demanded of her has the effect of making her own final silence more than a withdrawal; it becomes her positive indication that she can give (or not give) as good as she gets.

The final break with tribal language is also triggered by Adaku. Because Adaku has used Nnaife's army pay to set herself up in trade during the senior wife's absence, Nnu Ego appeals to the men of the Ibo community in Lagos. They condemn Adaku, using the tribal evaluation that the wife who has borne male children is the superior one and should get the money, but, although the judgement goes in her favour, Nnu Ego cannot concur. Although she still

shares their belief in the importance of male children, the realities of her urban life (her threadbare clothes, her empty stomach, her urine-stained and bug-ridden bed) as well as certain sisterly sympathies for Adaku do not allow her to ally herself with the tribal verdict.

Nnu Ego's understanding of "wife" and of "woman" has now undergone profound change, but the challenge to her sense of "mother" is still to come. Her goal throughout has been to ensure that her sons should be well educated but she has been unable to see that in exposing them to an alien world she would risk losing them. Therefore her sons' choices, to study abroad rather than to take well-paid local jobs, come as a painful shock to her. She seems at first to succeed in accommodating herself to their decision for she is able to say of the new basis on which she must relate to her sons that "parents only get reflected glory from their children nowadays" (1980: 213), but in Nnu Ego's subsequent lonely death, Emecheta indicates that the sons' neglect is a betrayal of the concept of motherhood as Nnu Ego still really understands it, and that that betrayal kills her. That her sons have also not really understood the change they have been demanding of her is evident in their building a shrine to tribal motherhood in memory of her. As their gesture denies Nnu Ego's efforts to come to terms with contemporary, urban motherhood, she is left with only one way of making the importance of her endeavours felt – the silence of refusal.

This woman's final silence joins her earlier laughter as being an example of the small but vital way in which her being can be expressed within, but not on the terms set by, male language. The space created by this silence at the end of the novel works rather like the reading of Isak Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page" proposed by Susan Gubar (1982). The story involves the display of the wedding sheets of Portuguese princesses and tells how, in the framed, named and dated collection of linen, only one sheet is unmarked by the required shedding of virginal blood. Gubar suggests that this blank sheet is to be read as a "mysterious but potent act of resistance" which is powerful by virtue of its raising so many unanswerable questions: "the blank page contains all stories in no story, just as silence contains all potential sound and white contains all colour" (1982: 89). This is a claim that will work if an intention can be attributed to absence. Elaine Showalter comments on the dangers in women's remaining silenced (1982: 21) but if silence is a chosen part of a woman's speech, as it is in Nnu Ego's case, then the matter is different; then the subversion of male language can be seen to occur.

Identifying the ways in which the subversion of the limitations imposed by a male language may occur in women's lives is not an easy project for any woman writing, let alone for an African woman. Introducing a collection of writing by African women, Charlotte Bruner says that writing itself, in as much as it is to break with a non-individualised cultural code and to "speak out as an individual and as a woman" (1983: xiii), demands something exceptional of an African woman; Buchi Emecheta herself corroborates this view in an interview with Itala Vivan:

... in a society where there is no social security, and where every boy or girl must

belong to someone or something, there is no place for feminism, for individualism or for independence. Therefore I say that those of us in Africa, if we are feminist, must be ultrafeminist, because our job is so much harder. (1984: 77)

The problem facing writers who take up the "ultrafeminist . . . job" is, as Mary Jacobus puts it, to speak "both for and as a woman (rather than 'like' a woman)" (1979: 15). What has been identified here in Emecheta's writing is how her novel by depicting a second entry into the symbolic, can expose both the imposition and the subversion of androcentric concepts. Whether or not it is possible or even desirable to get beyond such subversion and achieve a distinctively female language, let alone the *écriture féminine* envisaged by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, is a matter which they, by proposing such an idea, have made it possible to debate but not yet to resolve. The possibility of creating an inevitable link between biology and writing which seems to haunt such debates and which might only serve to render women's writing forever marginal, may be avoided by the suggestion made by Mary Ellman (1986) that the desired female qualities should be looked for in the writing, not in the writer. As her quirky examples of Norman Mailer and Mary McCarthy indicate, this would leave it open for women or men to achieve the desired release of hitherto circumscribed capacities. Ellman identifies one characteristic of such writing as the disruption of authority and sees it as a liberating rather than a simply embattled force in writing. Thus, if the subversion of misogynistic practices and the possible opening of a female linguistic range can be achieved by imagining the way a woman's laughter or her silence helps to do this, as happens with Emecheta's protagonist, then what is achieved should be liberating for all users of language.

Notes

1. The conditions of women in Nigerian society are discussed by Brown (1981) and Omeh (1980).
2. The dialectical relationship of "the symbolic" to the prelinguistic phase, "le sémiotique" as Kristeva terms it, is discussed in Toril Moi (1985) and in K K Ruthven (1984). Their works also introduce the ideas of Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

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