

Deconstructing Modern Womanhood: Myth, Ideology and Lived Reality in *Double Yoke* by Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract

The present paper examines the role and condition of so-called modern woman who stand against the cultural norms of a particular milieu. Buchi Emecheta is considered to be a prominent Nigerian author who describes Nko as a resilient character that she herself is. Nko is her mouthpiece of modern woman. She is torn apart between the two ideological states: traditional Nigerian beliefs and modern progressive values. The transformation of ritualistic and traditionalistic Nigerians into modern African women and men makes them bear multiple loads that become their predicament in the course of the transition from one value system to another. This transition period however is characterised by moral confusion and disorder. It is difficult to know what is right and what is wrong. Nko, the protagonist desires her upliftment with her academic degree which was provided to her with additional responsibilities of pregnancy from her professor. Such is the irony of modern woman. The feminist approach and cultural aspects are far beyond the ground realities of the modern world. The role of female protagonist in the novel exposes the schism between the limiting yet familiar comforts of traditional African roles, and more expensive and sometimes dangerous choices offered by modern society. These forces buffet the life of the main characters in the novel.

Keywords: Exploitation, modernity, waves of feminism, feminism, culture, sexuality.

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is one of the prominent Nigerian authors who interprets the pains and pangs of Nigerian women in her writings. Florence Buchi Emecheta was a Nigeria-born British novelist and educator whose works examine the intersections of racial prejudices and gender operations. Along with this, she also discusses economic hardships faced by an African woman in Nigeria and the British diaspora. Born to Igbo parents in Yaba near Lagos, Emecheta had a tough childhood. Her father, a railway worker and her mother, a seamstress died when she was young. Having been orphaned at an early age, she was raised by her relatives and later, pursued education on scholarship. She was married at an early age and bore the torments of an unhappy conjugal life. Eventually, she was forced to navigate the life of a single mother for her five children. Despite her cultural barriers, she continued the life of her own choice. In the present novel, Nko is her mouthpiece to represent her hardships. Here, the researcher will attempt to explore the details of Nko as Modern woman who suffers a lot due to her modernity. Nko, the leading character in the novel, decides to pursue a degree from

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university. Her fiancé and her professor sexually exploit her and yet, criticize her. They call her 'slut' after exploiting her body and spirit. This irony of modern woman has been exposed in this novel.

Literature Survey

Various studies have been carried out around the proposed novel.

Divya S Patel in her paper "Theme of Double Yoke in the Select Novels of Buchi Emecheta" examines the theme of double yoke, that is amalgam of cultural effects on her women characters, in Emecheta's *Double Yoke* and *Kehinde*.

Maryam Moein Kharazi and Kaihan Bahmani in their study "Food and Female Identity in Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" present a comparative account of the two novels in the context of food and female identity.

Masha, Lethabo and Mogoboya, Mphoto in their article "Female Sexualities under a Patriarchal Microscope: An Interrogation of Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke*" employ the theoretical lens of Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) to interrogate the exploitation of female bodies in patriarchal African set up.

Dhayalakrishnan, R. in his article "Portrayal of Lives and Emotions of African Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" analyses the man- woman relationship in a male-dominated society and the hardships faced by a woman at different stages of motherhood.

These articles analyse the themes, characters, female identity and female emotions in a patriarchal society. However, in the present study the analysis of the novel *Double Yoke* and the conditions in the life of Nko are closely attempted in the light of the relevant feminist studies in this sphere.

Elaine Showalter's concept of gynocriticism propounded in his study, *A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1978) and *Towards a feminist poetics* (1979) offers a critical approach to the works of women writers and the portrayals of female characters, emphasizing autonomous female literary traditions. It explains that women are not merely subjects as portrayed in male literature, rather, they are actually the producers.

Bell Hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) expands feminism intersectionally, centring race, class, and marginalized voices beyond white, middle-class perspectives. Hazel Tionloc Biana in her research paper "Extending Bell Hooks" extends this theory stating that the central problem within feminist discourse is our disability to arrive on

a point about what feminism is or to accept its definition. Without agreeing on definition, the feminists lack a sound foundation on which to construct theory of meaningful praxis.

Modern feminist approaches analyse how gender shapes social life with an aim to dismantle patriarchy and intersectional oppressions (race, class, sexuality). Moving beyond early equality-focused waves, contemporary theory emphasizes intersectionality, anti-essentialism, and diverse identities. The role of female protagonist Nko in the novel exposes the face of patriarchal society.

Research methodology

This literary research adopts a qualitative, text-centered methodology which is rooted in postcolonial feminist criticism and subaltern studies. It also studies African feminist criticism and cultural studies, with a primary focus on Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982), supplemented by contextual references to her oeuvre and related Nigerian narratives. It employs close reading through a feminist lens—inspired by scholars like Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie. Both the Nigerian womanist supported the idea that the western feminism is unsuitable for African woman. Africanism offers pro family and co-operative approach. Here the researcher dissects the protagonist Nko's navigation of the "double yoke": the intersecting oppressions of patriarchal traditions that petrol her chastity under male dominance, she also faces modern academic hurdles e.g., exploitation by professors and her urban alienation in a Nigerian university. The university represents the colonial western exploitation mindset. In his book *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o lays down his decolonization theories, explores hybridity between Igbo customs and Western modernity, tracing motifs of self-identity, rebellion, and gendered double standards amid postcolonial tensions. Thematic and comparative intertextuality with works like *The Joys of Motherhood* reveals women's agency in resisting double colonization, prioritizing historical insights into Nigeria's evolving gender norms.

The Story Arc

Double Yoke intertwined the life of Ete Kamba who is an undergraduate and supported by scholarship at the University of Calabar. He is aspiring to prominence in his Village. On the other side there is Nko, a determined female student from a nearby village. The narrative begins when Ete encounters Nko at a party. Ete feels initial attraction towards Nko. Nko a modern confident is celebrating her cousin Arit's achievement. Ete's traditional expectations of female submissiveness clashes with Nko's educated assertiveness. Nko harbours and cherishes genuine love for Ete. On the other side Ete is driven by lust and coerces sexual

relations with Nko. Subsequently he questions her virginity and chastity. Ete is a traditional African man who pledges to marry a woman who gives herself to him without apology, who refuses the shame of lost virginity and who makes it clear that education is not merely a hobby for her. He feels proud for Nko as his girlfriend but he cannot abide the shift in power, her independent thinking which reminds him of his second-class category. Later, Nko is condemned as a slut by Ete. She also faced domestic violence.

Later the professor of the university makes a deal with Nko. She is exploited by the professor and she has to accept his will in order to receive a degree. This degree is awarded to her in return of her unwanted pregnancy by the professor. Here the sex role has been discussed; the female body becomes the source of exploitation. Female subjugation has been exposed. There is scant evidence of early organized protest against such circumscribed status. This story of Nko can be compared to an incident of Roman society in 3rd century BCE when women gathered in Capitoline hill and blocked every entrance to the forum when Marcus Cato repelled attempts to abolish laws restraining women's use of expensive goods. "If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt?" Cato cried. "As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors." (Noor, N.)

This fear reverberates in each society and in each power- centric structure.

Feminism

The worldwide clash between the roles of traditional and modern woman arises from societal expectations woven around family, career and independent identity of women. Traditionally, women are assigned domestic duties which are unpaid for while they depend on male members for their sustenance under patriarchal social set up. On the other hand, modern women struggle under the double yoke of their paid work along with the domestic chore for which they get no financial benefit. They are economically independent and hence, claim individuality and equal status in society.

Four waves of feminism are the clarion call to define the role and status of woman in patriarchal societies. The discussions on women rights began around 1848 when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. It pleaded for the equality of men and women with the earnest demand for the right to vote. The first wave advocated for educational and political rights for women which were particularly meant for upper classes, leaving the ordinary women out of canvas. The second wave between 1960s to 1970s was a period of radical changes. It drew attention towards the rights of working women and defied sex-discrimination and it was chiefly steered by educated middle class women. Hence, there was tension between white and black feminists as the white feminists only focussed on issues

related to them and neglected the problems faced by black women. The third wave of Feminism had widely different goals. The focus was shifted from traditional gender roles and norms to rights of women for control on their body. It was a sex positive movement that underlined intersectionality, sexism, racism etc. It advocated for femininity as an empowering force. The undercurrent fourth wave is overpowered by digital technologies and social media activism.

The novel *Double Yoke* was produced in 1981 when the western world was celebrating the second wave of feminism and the third wave was approaching. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, holds perspective that individuals are situated in a matrix of race, class, and gender, requiring a multifaceted approach to oppression. In social theory, the increasing effects of multiple forms of discrimination affecting the daily lives of individuals, particularly women of colour are underway. The term also refers more broadly to intellectual framework for understanding how various aspects of individual identity—including gender, race and sexuality—interact to create unique experiences of privilege or oppression. The idea of a universal “woman” experience, focuses instead on how gender is constructed through language and social performances. Patriarchal structures are deeply embedded in society and that a complete overhaul of societal norms is necessary along with a overthrow of male violence and patriarchal control of sexuality. Marxist feminism suggests how capitalism and the division of labour contribute to women’s oppression, based on the economic structures that disadvantage women. The core concepts in feminist theory are sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, difference, and choice. There are systems and structures in place that work against individuals. Research in critical model requires the belief that, through the exploration of these existing conditions in the current social order, truths can be revealed. More important, however, this exploration can simultaneously build awareness of oppressive systems and create spaces for diverse voices to speak for themselves (Egbert & Sanden, 2019). Feminism is concerned with the constructs of intersectionality, dimensions of social life, social inequality, and social transformation. Through feminist research, lasting contributions have been made to understanding the complexities and changes in the gendered division of labour. Men and women should be politically, economically, and socially equal and this theory does not subscribe to differences or similarities between men, nor does it refer to excluding men or only furthering women’s causes. Feminist theory works to support change and understanding through acknowledging and disrupting power and oppression.

Work Place Exploitation and Sexual Harassment

Workplace exploitation of modern women in Nigeria intensifies the clash between traditional homemaker roles and emerging career demands, trapping women in precarious jobs amid

weak protections and cultural biases. Sexual harassment pervades sites like construction (driven by inflation pushing women into labour) and offices, with threats of pay cuts or firing for refusal. Gender biases limit promotions, create hostile environments via bullying, and enforce pay gaps, especially for marginalized groups like disabled or LGBTQ+ women. “The Breaking Barriers: Addressing the Challenge Limiting Women in Leadership- WIMBIZ” the article on the voice of women wfm 91.7 asserts the pangs of modern Nigerian woman.

Despite progress, Nigerian women still encounter sexual harassment, workplace bullying, gender bias, and societal stereotypes that create hostile work environments and limit their career advancement. While comprehensive national data is limited, numerous reports indicate that sexual harassment remains a pervasive issue in Nigerian workplaces and it dissuades many women from pursuing or sustaining leadership roles. Unconscious bias and outdated gender norms reinforce the notion that leadership is a male domain. The 2021 Global Gender Gap Report ranked Nigeria 139th out of 156 countries in terms of gender parity, highlighting the tenacious inconsistency in leadership representation.

That workplace exploitation and sexual harassment are common in Nigerian society, is clearly visible in the case of Nko. Buchi portrays the sexual harassment of Nko at the hands of her lover and even her professor to whom she had to succumb for attaining an academic degree. The helpless girl isn't able to pursue academic excellence without exploitation and harassment, Nko is willing and has calibre to pursue leadership position in the Nigerian society but she is denied and crushed by the superior authorities like her professor and her boyfriend whom she loves and revered.

Modern Womanhood: An Ambiguous Notion

The image of modern woman is drawn with vibrant colours of independence, educational brilliance, liberation and individuality seems to be a fairytale when compared to reality. Even Nko's life badly disassembles the flawless image. In the name of modernization, society offers fresh forms of patriarchal controls like exploitation by the academicians, forced sex, and intense mental traumas. She tries to assert her individuality through academic brilliance. However, her sincere efforts to this path are inhumanly thwarted by her torch bearer. She is unfortunately subjected to moral patrolling by her lover and exploitation by her professor; the two men that represent forces of patriarchy in the life of the poor girl. As a result of exploitation from her professor she bears forced pregnancy. Her perspective of academic growth is ironically tangled with physical victimization yet she bears everything quietly. She carries double yoke: the liability of being a modern woman with her hopes and aspirations and the burden of tradition as a social being. Her modernity garbs her unfortunate coercion

under patriarchal values. The professor symbolizes the institutional authority masked behind his role as mentor; one who is meant to pave the way for intellectual uplift of his mentee becomes the instrument of her oppression. The same figure who should enable her intellectual empowerment becomes the source of her destabilization. His character exposes the harsh reality of modern world and the key patriarchal truth that men exercise power; women bear its consequences. Ironically, education which should be a cause of empowerment becomes the source of exploitation, here.

Ete, the lover boy, promotes modernity by statements like ‘woman who is educated ‘just enough’ . He appreciates Nko for intellectual brilliance and progressive efforts but becomes the cause of her social exclusion by refusing to marry her. His appreciation of modernity is conditioned by patriarchal norms. He contributes to the social humiliation of Nko. He also participates in her character assassination. He is a crucial catalyst in her tragic trajectory. His character illustrates that the modern education does not necessarily transform gender attitudes.

Cultural Orthodoxy and it's Conflict with Global Identity

In the present novel Emecheta tries to bring home the point that cultural dogmas still haunted Nigerian women. The novel, *Double Yoke* actually maintains the cold hard look at the Nigerian social formation and gender relationship. The very beginning of the novel introduces a class where no single female student is found among thirty students in Miss Bulewao's class. Ete the lover boy is disgusted to take miss Bulewao (a women) as his role model. The disgust of Ete is indicative of traditional values of male supremacy that still pervaded in modern Nigeria. The orthodoxy and ritualistic traditionalism of society, conventionally masculinised in nature and blatantly concerned to upkeep the superiority and dominance of males, always aspire to shape the personality of woman in accordance with the expectations of male folk. We evidently feel it in the character of Ete who offers “his nostalgic praise to the African mother” whom he would like to marry if he could as he regards her as the ‘epitome of woman hood’, the type whose price was above the Biblical rubies. These Biblical rubies are the concept of global identity which the patriarchal mindset like Ete refuse. He believes in and approves of the type who took pride not in herself but in her man. He praises the “type who would always obey her man, no matter what, even if he commanded her to walk through fire, the type that never questioned.” (*Double Yoke* 37)

In this way the traditional African women is getting appreciation as one who passively surrenders to the dictates of her man and never tries to transcend the timeless patriarchal values of society. The cultural orthodoxy reserves the position of dominance enjoyed by

African men by trying to mould the character of woman in his life. Ete in his first meeting with Nku expresses; “a very quiet and submissive women a good cook, a good listener, a good worker a good mother with good education to match” (Double Yoke 26)

The traditional part of Nku creates a confused educated African female character who wants to play the role of submissive, gentle, docile female. She also wishes an archetypical female version which is desired and designed by traditional African society. When Nku is attempting for her degree, she constantly lives in a fear that by doing so she is disappointing her family. The thought of her internalization of a narrow-limited role as a subservient woman encapsulated through her submission to Reverend Ikot’s advances and Ete’s demand exposes her psychological servitude. Nku submits to the sexual harassment of Ikot thus hitting a new disgrace in female subjugation. A critic Marie Umesh criticised her sexual bargain. According to her, the moral laxity need not to be equated with the new African women. Further she adds that ironically, Emecheta in her plot does not ploy female liberation in Africa, instead she strengthens the belief of the conservative Nigerian who fear that western education leads women to all sorts of corruption. Nku’s easy negotiation for sex gives impetus to traditional Nigerian belief that education might be a contributing factor to ethical leniency in females.

Nku’s psyche veiled behind her modern outlook directs her track of thinking. Nku in the novel stands on the no -win situation. The young African women face the problems to balance their career with the structures of traditional values. It is expected to them that they would balance both their personal interests as well as the interests which their parents have while concurrently maintaining a stereotypical marital life. Female quandary and acceptance of female subjectivity is displayed by Nku’s speech “oh mother, I want to have both worlds. I want to be an academician and I want to be a quite nice and obedient wife, the type all want to be.” (Double Yoke 94)

It articulates the dilemma of female subjects who in spite of having efficiency and position want to be in line with the requirement of Nigerian culture. This double yoke is a double bind that ensnares female subjects like Nku. The advice and worry of Nku’s mother are evident here, “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.... because daughter, you know what you are under, you are under a double yoke.”(DY 94)

Western feminism could not be appropriate standard for a Nigerian woman. Katherine Frank argues that western feminism in Nigerian society is contradictory because feminism by definition is a profoundly individualistic philosophy. It values personal growth and individual fulfilment over any larger communal needs or goods. African society, of course, even in its

most westernised modern forms, places the values of the group over those of the individual with the result that the notion of an African feminist almost seems a contradiction in term.”

Nigerian women took so much pain to not to be labelled as feminist. In the novel Mrs Nwaizu iterates that the feminism in Nigeria means everything the society says is bad in women. Independence, outspokenness, immorality, all the ills which could be thought of. So even the educated ones who are classically feminist and liberated in their attitude and behaviour, will come round and say to you, but she considers herself as gentle and not the pushful type. Her views expose that the African women’s innate predisposition is to embrace values that would earn them some respect in their own social surroundings. The dual oppression lays bare thread of culture that is relapsing. Davies and Graves suggest that if African woman wants to feel liberated and fulfilled as a woman, she must renounce her African identity, her inherent sexism which is prevalent in many African societies. Or, if a woman needs to cherish and affirm her Africanism, she must renounce her claims to feminine independence with self-determination. She has to lose one side either she could be fulfilled with Africanness or self-deteriorated. This is a dual conflict between modernism and traditionalism.

Conclusion

The present study of the novel *Double Yoke* and the deconstruction of modern woman in reference with the novel exposes the paradox intrinsic in feminist discourse and its practice. Through the life and struggles of Nko Emecheta the crude reality that modern woman is victimized by institutions as well as intimate relations. The notion of modernity is an ambiguous perspective in traditional male-dominated societies where man accepts modernity selectively. He promotes it only when it does not challenge his authority. Because of these contradictions Nko suffers traditionally as well culturally. *Double Yoke* exposes the contrast between the ideal and reality. It lays bare the irony that modern woman seems modern but is actually confined.

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