



**Remembering
Buchi
Emecheta
(1944-2017)**

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On the morning of 25 January 2017, the literary world woke to the news of the passing of the Nigerian-born British novelist, Buchi Emecheta, who had died peacefully at her home in London, aged 72. For a literary figure of such stature, it is only fitting that a tribute to her life be as generous as the lavish ceremonies and rites that mark Igbo funerals. In Igbo culture, funeral orations are a vital component of burials, as they are made in praise of the deceased, indicating a life well-lived, measured and reflected by the duty, obligations, discernments, and convictions held as well as carried out by a person during his or her lifetime. It is thus my hope that this tribute will offer an appropriate libation for an acclaimed Igbo novelist such as Emecheta, for whom writing was not merely an occupation but a vocation.

When one has reached the end of her life, it is the role of those present to speak of her beginning. Florence Onye Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria on 21 July 1944 to Igbo parents Alice and Jeremy Emecheta. Emecheta was no stranger to the double standards that prevailed in her patriarchal, working-class, colonial Nigerian society. Her father was a railway worker who could only afford to send her younger brother Adolphus to school. Although she was the eldest, Emecheta was kept at home because she was a girl. Yet, Emecheta's perseverance was evident even at an early age. Through a benefactor who recognized her intelligence, Emecheta was able to attend school and eventually won a four-year scholarship to the Methodist Girls High School, a highly reputable institution in Nigeria which had some of the best students and teachers. She married Sylvester Onwordi in 1960 at the age of 16. Two years later, already a young mother of two, she followed her husband to England where he went to pursue his studies. Unable to tolerate her abusive marriage, she left her husband in 1966 after he burnt the manuscript of her first book *The Bride Price* because he was unable to accept her representation of Igbo men and the struggles faced by Igbo women within oppressive relationships. A black single mother of five at the age of 22, she struggled to support herself and her children while working, writing, and pursuing a degree in sociology.

I believe Emecheta's career as a writer began when her husband burnt her handwritten manuscript of *The Bride Price*, which was to later become her first two semi-fictional novels, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974). These two novels which were compiled later in one volume, *Adah's Story* (1983), reveal her private struggles during her marriage to Sylvester, while also depicting her resourcefulness and strength as an Igbo woman in the face of adversity. It was at this point, when her manuscript was destroyed, that Emecheta realized she had a voice and that it needed to be heard. In an interview with BBC World Service, Emecheta expressed how she stumbled upon her writing career, "The first book I wrote was *The Bride Price* which was a romantic book, but my husband burnt the book when he saw it. I was the typical African woman, I'd done this privately, I wanted him to look at it, approve it and he said he wouldn't read it. And later he burnt the book and I think by that time this urge to write had become more important to me than he realised, and that was the day I said I'm going to leave this marriage and he said "what for, that stupid book" and I said "I just feel you just burnt my child" (Obera).

In likening her first manuscript to a child, Emecheta recognized its potential for self-inscription — "the story that she was going to show [her children] when they grew up" (Emecheta, *Adah's Story* 140). In her seminal work on womanism, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Alice Walker honours Emecheta in a chapter titled "A Writer Because of, Not In Spite Of, Her Children", deliberating her impressions of Emecheta as a

woman writer and mother. She pays special attention to Emecheta's dedication page in *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), in which there is an intrinsic link between inscription and mothering:

To my dear children,
Florence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy and Alice
without whose sweet background noises
this book would not have been written.

Walker aptly observes that Emecheta writes because she is both writer and mother. Her second child Sylvester Onwordi recalls in his tribute to her that Emecheta was always compelled to write, sharing her ideas with her children as she sat at her kitchen table writing. If anything, then, the burning of her manuscript ignited within Emecheta an urgent call, "*Ndi b'anyi, KWENU*, for the women will now speak through their texts" (Ogunyemi 127).

Emecheta was indeed a prolific writer and her inspiration came from both her cultural background and the personal setbacks and deprivations she experienced. Her oeuvre covers various literary genres — novels, plays, and children's books. From *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) to *Destination Biafra* (1982), Emecheta created independent, inspiring, and feisty female characters who showcased various facets of the African female experience. These portrayals challenged anachronistic representations and allowed her works to become metaphorical conveyors of self-renewal and self-actualization. While all of Emecheta's works were ambitious, reflecting her depth and skill in writing, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Kehinde* (1994) were exceptionally daring. In both texts, Emecheta's interrogation of motherhood and womanhood questions the legitimacy of the "Mother Africa" trope that bears down heavily on women and ensures their cyclical subjugation. Through Nnu Ego, Emecheta criticizes the romanticisation of the idea of selfless dedication; in her desperate desire to fulfil her role as a good wife and mother, Nnu Ego becomes a "slave" to these roles. Tragically, despite having eight children and dedicating her life to providing for them, "Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside, thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother" (Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* 224). On the other hand, *Kehinde* is Nnu Ego fully realized, who rebukes the "silent" space of gendered structures by no longer choosing to be the "cultural hump" for her family, "my whole life was wound around your needs ... Mothers are people too, you know ... I [Kehinde] just don't have the energy to be the carrier of everybody's burden anymore" (Emecheta, *Kehinde* 139). *Kehinde's* concluding lines create a fully realized portrait of an Igbo woman, "claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human" (141). The intertextual thematic strand of such texts offers valuable insights into Emecheta's poetics of "writing back", of depicting the development of women principally through reconstructing notions of motherhood.

In her long career as a writer, Emecheta received many accolades that bore testimony to her considerable talent as one of Africa's pioneering women writers. Unlike contemporary writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe, and Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani who have had more opportunities and avenues to publish their works, Emecheta like Flora Nwapa had to contend with sexist, biased, and male-oriented literary traditions that often refused to recognise women's voices and stories. It is the perseverance and courage of first and second generation women writers like Emecheta that paved the way for other, younger African women

authors. Among the many honours bestowed on Emecheta in her lifetime was when she won the New Statesman Jock Campbell Award in 1978 and was named by Granta as “Best of the Young British Novelists” in 1983. She also received an honorary doctorate of literature from Farleigh Dickinson University in 1992. She was appointed an OBE (The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) in 2005, for her notable contributions to literature. She was also an invited speaker at numerous talks and conferences, served as a visiting academic at several US universities, and as a resident fellow of English at the University of Calabar in Nigeria. She also lectured at Yale University and the University of London, where she was made a Fellow in 1986.

I never had the privilege of meeting Buchi Emecheta. Yet, when I read her remarkable life story and her works as an undergraduate, it evoked within me an unquenchable thirst for Nigerian (women’s) literature and Igbo culture that eventually led me to pursue a life in academia, a career which offered me the space to explore these subjects in greater detail. Buchi Emecheta has left an indelible mark in my life as well as in the lives of many others and the literary world is indeed thankful for her extraordinary gift of writing. A simple instance of this can be seen through the numerous tributes found on the internet and social media sites following the news of her death. Her legacy of words bears witness to truth, which is an inheritance that Emecheta as a writer chose to leave for women in particular. I have no doubt that she will continue to inspire generations to come with the works she has left behind. Truly, Emecheta is befitting of the Igbo homage “*Odogwu Nwanyi! Ada Igbo ji eme onu!*” – “Magnificent woman! An Igbo daughter that Igbo people can boast about!”.

We will miss you Buchi Emecheta. *Laa na Ndokwa* (Rest in Peace).

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