
Emecheta, Florence Onyebuchi [Buchi]

(1944–2017)

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Buchi Emecheta (1944–2017), by George Hallett

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Emecheta, Florence Onyebuchi [Buchi] (1944–2017), novelist, was born in Yaba, near Lagos, Nigeria, on 21 July 1944 to Igbo Christian parents, Alice Ogbanje Emecheta, *née* Okwuekwuhe, and her husband Jeremy Nwabudinke Emecheta, a railway worker, who were both from Umuezeokolo Odeanta village in Ibusa, Delta State, an old Igbo kingdom. She later wrote, ‘My father told me very, very early in my life that why my third Ibo name is Nnenna—father’s mother, was because I am his comeback mother. It was said that when my father’s mother was dying, she had promised my father that she would come again, this time as his daughter’ (‘Comeback Mother: Buchi Emecheta’). The centrality of mothers set the coordinates for her pioneering literary depictions in a prolific writing career producing novels, plays, novellas, polemic, journalism, an autobiography, and books for children. She stated on more than one occasion, ‘My books are like my children’: she had no favourites and she could not criticize them (*The Guardian*, 3 Feb 2017).

Buchi Emecheta spent her childhood in Ibusa but did not attend school. Her parents could only afford to send one child and prioritized her younger brother. She understood her multiple heritages from an early age and reflected how her parents ‘wanted me to learn the rigorous Ibo life’ even while living in Lagos where she had to ‘speak Yoruba all the time’ (Emecheta, ‘Feminism with a Small “f”!’, 173). Her love of storytelling was catalysed by listening to her ‘Big Mother’ (her aunt) tell mesmerizing tales of ancestors and heroic deeds. Young Buchi resolved to become a storyteller like her. When she was eight her beloved father died of injuries sustained as a soldier in Burma during the Second World War. The children were dispersed to relatives as they could not be supported by her uneducated mother, who in accordance with Igbo custom was inherited by her late husband’s brother.

In 1954 Emecheta won a scholarship to the Methodist Girls' High School in Yaba where she mixed with girls from élite circles and learned English, her fourth language, in which she was to write her books. When she was disciplined by a teacher for stating that her ambition was to write like Wordsworth, the incident confirmed for her 'that the art of communication, be it in pictures, in music, writing, or in oral folklore is vital to the human' (Emecheta, 'Feminism with a Small "f"', 174). A year later her mother, who had not prized her daughter's talents, died, and the orphaned siblings continued to be ferried between various relations in Ibusa and Lagos.

Emecheta was betrothed to Sylvester Ndoki Onwordi (1933–1979) at the age of eleven and her dream of attending university was stymied by their marriage in 1960, when she was sixteen. Bearing four children before she was twenty, she financially supported them by working at the American embassy in Lagos for two years while Onwordi went to study at the University of London, later training as an accountant. In 1962 she joined her husband in London and by 1966 she had borne her fifth child. Between 1965 and 1969 she worked as a library assistant in the British Museum and began to write, something towards which her husband was antagonistic. The violence and unhappiness she endured in her marriage reached a disturbing climax when he burned her first manuscript of *The Bride Price* after she had asked him to read it. As a result she left him.

The way that Emecheta overcame hardship, raising five small children as a divorced 22-year-old African woman in a hostile surrounding society, remains one of the most extraordinary feats of personal and creative fortitude in British literary history. Her column for the *New Statesman* about life as a black immigrant woman in Britain was the foundation for her first published novel, *In the Ditch* (1972). The protagonist, Adah Obi (a fictionalized version of herself), endures the degrading social welfare experiences and racist treatment she and her family face with wryness, resilience, and an emerging awareness of her human rights. It set the course for Emecheta's oeuvre of exposing women's degradation: in Africa by repressive patriarchal practices, in Britain by racism. The novel was published by Allison & Busby, and Emecheta's editor, Margaret Busby, was to nurture and support the author's writing for over a decade. *In the Ditch* was issued with its sequel *Second-Class Citizen* in a single volume, *Adah's Story*, in 1974. Concurrently Emecheta attended evening classes at the University of London from 1970 to 1974 and gained a BSc (Hons) in sociology. In her review of *Second Class Citizen*, Jill Neville of the *Sunday Times* described Emecheta as a natural-born writer, and this work launched her in the United States as an important new African author. Her second-eldest child, Sylvester, painted a vivid scene of how her writing and domestic responsibilities were inextricably entwined: 'Hardly was one novel finished when she would be starting on the next, bouncing ideas around the kitchen table which was where she did her typing—an activity that seemed as normal to me and my siblings as her cooking or her storytelling' (*New Statesman*, 31 Jan 2017). As Busby noted, the dedications prefacing Emecheta's books were a poignant trajectory through her life, combining personal and social history. Her five children, Florence, Sylvester, Jake, Christy, and Alice, were the dedicatees of *Second-Class Citizen*, 'without whose sweet background noises this book would not have been written'.

Emecheta's novels not only championed female independence and the right of girls and women to education, self-expression, and respect, but also examined war and militarism in the complex aftermath of colonialism. In *Destination Biafra* (1982), the first female account of the Nigerian civil war, her heart-breaking dedication was 'to the memory of many relatives and friends who died in this war, especially my eight-year-old niece Buchi Emecheta, who died of starvation, and her four-year-old sister Ndidi Emecheta, who died two days afterwards of the same Biafran disease'. Her meticulous research

for this book included taking a cleaning job at Sandhurst. However, she was displeased when Allison & Busby omitted a sizeable section of material and she subsequently parted company with the publisher to found her own imprint, Ogwugwu Afor, with her son Sylvester.

Emecheta's indefatigable literary advocacy demanded recognition of African women's perspectives by channelling 'her personal pain into communal catharsis for all women, and especially for those who lived and worked in the difficult world defined by patriarchy and racism' (Okome, 403). Her internationally best-known work, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), was the woman's companion piece to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Ironically titled, it offered the most decisive critique of patriarchy's unsparing oppression of women. The narrative represents the psychological perspectives of co-wives Nnu Ego, who is crushed by male control, and Adaku, who radically rejects her marriage and is a liberating feminist character, but in African terms. Women's complicity in upholding their oppression is focalized through Nnu's dawning questioning of her worth as only measurable in child-bearing: 'But did not a woman have to bear the woman-child who would later bear the sons?', she says; and then, 'Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build' (pp. 186-7). Emecheta resisted the term feminism as being applicable to women of the African diaspora, stating that 'ours is a problem more than feminism' (Bryce, 35). Her friend Kadija Sesay, the publisher of *Sable LitMag*, recalled, 'Her fictionalised life story showed women that they could survive and succeed through adversity and abuse and stand up for feminism—all without using those actual words' (*The Guardian*, 3 Feb 2017).

Emecheta's international academic career encompassed visiting professorships at eleven American universities including Pennsylvania State, Pittsburgh, the University of California at Los Angeles, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and lecturing at Yale. The disillusionment she experienced while visiting professor of English at the University of Calabar, Nigeria, in 1980-81 inspired her book *Double Yoke* (1982), exposing the sexism and harassment women faced in academic contexts. Bright student Nko, confronted with her professor's sexual demands in return for a degree, and an apparent choice between being 'a bad, loser feminist' or to 'do without her degree and be a good loving wife', decides, 'She was going to manoeuvre these men to give her both!' (p. 140).

Emecheta was appointed a member of the home secretary's advisory council on race in 1979, served as an International PEN trustee from 1993 to 1998, and was a member of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1982-3. *The Slave Girl* (1977) was awarded the Jock Campbell *New Statesman* award in 1978. In 1983 she was listed alongside Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, and Ian McEwan as one of *Granta's* twenty 'best of young British' novelists. She received an honorary DLitt from Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey, in 1992, and was made an OBE for her services to literature in 2005.

Emecheta always found support in London through the Ibusa Cultural Development Union. Although she yearned to return to Ibusa, it did not materialize. In her final novels, *Kehinde* (1994) and *The New Tribe* (2000), her protagonists who attempt to return to live in Africa traverse two cultures, negotiating between idealization and reality, and the tension of resistance and compromise to tradition.

A stroke in 2010 severely incapacitated Emecheta's mobility and ability to write. After developing dementia in her final years, she died in her sleep at Highgate nursing home, in Hornsey Lane, London, on 25 January 2017. Her daughters Florence and Christy predeceased her. Sylvester founded Omenala Press (which incorporated Ogwugwu Afor Books) to ensure his mother's books remained in print. He retained her personal papers, including a huge repository of letters and diaries dating back to the 1950s. A posthumous exhibition, 'Comeback Mother: Buchi Emecheta', ran from April to May 2018 at

Goldsmiths, University of London, and on 23 October 2019 Margaret Busby formally opened the Buchi Emecheta Exhibition Space at Goldsmiths. Buchi Emecheta's legacy is not only her landmark literature but a life lived by synthesizing the powers of writing and motherhood as a compelling creative cornerstone.

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Archives

priv. coll. [S. Onwordi]

Film

interview footage, BFI NFTVA

Sound

interview, current affairs, performance, and documentary recording, BL NSA

Likenesses

G. Hallett, photograph, Africa Media Online [see illus.]

obituary photographs