

AFRICANESS IN THE MIRROR OF LANGUAGE IN EMECHETA'S THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD 1979

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ABSTRACT

The African novel can be considered as a hybrid of the Oral tradition typical to Africa and the imported literary form of Europe. The conflict generated by the meeting of the African and the European in the African literature written by women is quite interesting to know more about the consequences of these contacts as illustrated in literature, and makes of Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) a case which is worth investigating through a postcolonial reading highlighting two important cultural aspects in this novel and reflecting her Africaness: 1. the different linguistic devices that "nativize" the language used by Emecheta, 2. the simultaneous use of two temporalities: the western time, that may be called western diachronicity and the African time, typical to the writer's Igbo culture or the traditional synchronicity.

KEYWORDS: Buchi Emecheta, Africaness, Linguistic Devices, Traditional Synchronicity, Western Diachronicity

INTRODUCTION

Africa was literarily unheard for many centuries. Yet that does not mean that it has no history, or no literary tradition. On the contrary, this literature has a long oral tradition. 'Orality' has been inserted into their way of writing although the language used is the colonisers' and not the native one. The modern African writer brings his originality into literature by using some efficient tools of formulation such as proverbs, sayings, folktales and songs. These elements are used to alter the European languages to suit African surroundings and this, partly, represents his "Africaness" as it was called by (Emenyonu, 1974: 293), or "tropicalities" in African literary writings in English where literary aesthetic, language use and discourse are culturally embedded (Taoua, 2001: 203).

History has contributed to combine this oral tradition to the written one. One of the results of that combination is what Kachru considered a "nativized English" where various linguistic devices such as lexical innovations, translation equivalence, contextual redefinition and rhetorical and functional styles are used to contextualise English in the native culture of the author (Kachru, 2000: 142-4).

This paper consists in highlighting two important cultural aspects reflected in the writing of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* 1976 and mirroring her "Africaness": 1. the presence of different linguistic devices, 2. the use of a temporality typical to the writer's Igboⁱ culture.

Texts, from African literature, cannot be analysed regardless of some aspects of their aesthetic ideologiesⁱⁱ. In this novel, Emecheta writes "her" realismⁱⁱⁱ, a realism that involves the adoption of this aesthetic ideology. She writes in the classical realist fashion, just like Achebe did before her (Ngara, 1985: 109). This may be due essentially to two major facts. First, she was exposed to fictions written in the critical realist mode. Secondly, the chronological form of presentation

proper to the African folk tale influenced her writing and resulted in the linear structure of “her” realism. Her mother tongue affects her use of English as well. Hence the use of some linguistic devices in her writing.

EMECHETA’S LINGUISTIC DEVICES

In this novel we notice the use of linguistic devices to contextualise “a non-native language in [the writer’s] own ‘un-English’ culture” (Kachru, 2000: 142-4), considered as part and parcel of the author’s aesthetic ideology. Through such a use, Emecheta is, in some ways, claiming her “Africaness”. In her article “Buchi Emecheta: The Shaping of a self,” Ogunyemi recognizes Emecheta’s affirmation of her African Identity through this novel, and concludes that with *The Joys of Motherhood* Emecheta seems at last “to come to terms with her Africaness” (Ward, 1990: 84).

Her “Africaness” is felt in the choice of local words: “For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people” (Ngugi, 2005: 146). She uses lexical innovations, with the borrowing of local words into English, words for instance like: house buba (dress) (Emecheta, 1979: 8), otuogwu cloth (cloth) (Ibid: 13), dibia (healer) (Ibid: 31), chi (personal god) (Ibid: 32), abada cloth (cloth) (Ibid: 54), ogogoro (local wine) (Ibid: 111).

Translation equivalence is found as well in this text. A linguistic device whereby Emecheta translates from Igbo into English, like this praise name addressed to Idayi: “He who roars like a lion.” (Ibid: 29). This is a mode of address to the elders. It indicates power and authority of the elders in the village of Ibuza. It underlines the importance and respect given to an important chief in the traditional village.

There are also contextual redefinitions of lexical items of English in the Igbo context noticed in the use of the kinship terms of husband, wife, and mother. For instance, mother is a kinship term addressed by a son or a daughter to the biological mother and to all the co-wives of the father. The senior co-wife too takes the kinship term of “Mother”, addressed to her by younger co-wives (Ibid: 206). The term of “little husband” is used by young co-wives addressing the sons of the senior co-wife (Ibid: 196).

In addition to all these devices used in the writing of Emecheta, there are Igbo proverbs translated into English, an instance of which is the use the extradiegetic narrator to describe the quarrel between Nnu Ego and another Igbo female character in Lagos: “If the tongue and the mouth quarrel, they invariably make it up because they have to stay in the same head.” (Ibid: 63). The proverb, as used in this passage, serves to emphasize and deepen the force of the meaning of solidarity, mainly between Igbo women, in Igbo culture. Since it implies Igbo female characters, this proverb could also be considered as an emphasis put on the African womanist theory^{iv}, in the sense that African women do not need feminist issues to solve their problems and speak for them, they have their own issues. Emenyonu described the proverb as the “palm oil with which words are eaten” (1974: 392), using an Igbo saying for such a description. This could be considered as a partial definition of the writer’s Africaness while using the colonial language in his or her literature.

Through all the changes brought by British colonialism in the fictional setting Lagos, a different way to locate time, used by the author, is noticed; a location of time through which the African culture is distinguished from the European one.

EMECHETA'S TEMPORELITIES: TRADITIONAL SYNCHRONICITY VERSUS WESTERN DIACHRONICITY

The narrative suggests two temporalities that are found simultaneously in urban Lagos. Nnu Ego lived her motherhood in both temporalities. There is a constant confrontation of the female protagonist with two times in this novel: the western time, that may be called western diachronicity and the African time or the traditional African synchronicity.

The African synchronicity has its roots, first, in a traditional setting, the village of Ibuza. It is highlighted in the passage describing Agbadi's household making sacrifices, whereby "goats were slaughtered", to appease Agbadi's personal God (Emecheta, 1979: 154). This is a reference to the world of the dead to save the world of the living. In Lagos, Nnu Ego and Nnaife try to find their place between these two times. In other words, with the drastic change of setting, from Ibuza to Lagos, the novel achieves a drastic change in time, in temporality, from African to Western, from synchronicity to diachronicity.

The writer offers many instances that describe traditional beliefs such as the belief in Chi, the personal God. Nnu Ego is a child who was born with a scar on her head to remind of the presence of a dead slave considered as the personal Chi of Nnu Ego: "nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it." (Achebe in Philips, 1994: 93). Each time Nnu Ego felt bad in Lagos she prayed and made sacrifices to that dead slave girl, her Chi. This could be seen as a need to go back to the past each time she felt threatened by the present. About Nnu Ego's Chi, Emecheta writes through the narrator when the female protagonist decided to commit suicide because of the loss of her first child: "...It would all soon be over, right there under the deep water that ran below Carter Bridge. Then she would be able to seek out and meet her chi, her personal God, and she would ask her why she had punished her so..." (Ibid: 9).

This notion of Chi could be considered as a reference to traditional synchronicity, a way to return to the past. This notion is also a hint at immortality. The natural element which is in close relation to the Chi is water. When other natural elements are linked either to death or to life, water could be linked to both, depending on circumstances. When Nnu Ego wanted to die she went to the river and when she wanted children she prayed her Chi in the river. Water, where her Chi rested, could either bless Nnu Ego with a lot of children or simply be the source of malediction, in this case, her childlessness. The aquatic nature is reflected in African literary writing and other African artistic expressions, and without a "lucid understanding of the power of water in the constitution of Africa's identity, it is impossible to interpret correctly African art from yesterday to tomorrow." (Diadgi, 2003: 273). This aquatic nature of the African existence is well summed up by a poem written by Birago Diop:

- "Those who have died are never gone,
- They are in the water that flows,
- They are the water that sleeps,
- The dead have not died,
- Listen more often,
- To things than to beings,

- Hear the voice of water,” (Ibid, 2003:180)

Each time in the novel there is a reference to the personal Chi of Nnu Ego, there is a constant movement backward and forward in time. This specific temporality is typical to Emecheta’s culture (Barthelemy, 1989: 560). This traditional synchronicity is noticed in an urban setting such as Lagos. To have many children, for Nnu Ego, was a way to assure duration in Lagos, a way to secure immortality through her children in a place where western diachronicity was invading African synchronicity. When Nnu Ego lost her child at the beginning of the novel, she preferred to die, to join her personal Chi in the river, another way to go back to immortality. Childlessness stopped continuity and immortality typical to traditional African synchronicity. She sought to replace immortality that she secured through children by that of death; this is once more African synchronicity in action since death in Igbo beliefs does not mean the end as in western diachronicity.

“...birth implied a passage from the spirit world to the material world. Death—a different kind of birth—implied passage from the material world back to the spirit world. Accordingly, the cyclic continuity between the two worlds was perhaps most vulnerable where issues of birth and death were involved. Children were necessary to maintain the continuity of the cycle, and childlessness was viewed as the “worst fate” that could befall an African. Marriage was seen as inextricable from procreation and therefore sacred. Thus the rituals surrounding childbirth, marriage and death as well were essentially invocations to spirit guardians to maintain the cycle.”(Barthelemy, 1989: 569)

The death of Nnu Ego’s father symbolizes this traditional temporality as well. Her farewell to her father was a kind of farewell to the traditional man with the coming of the colonised man. Yet, the father promised to be back through Nnu Ego’s children (Emecheta, 1979: 154). This promise sounds like a better future for Nigeria where traditional synchronicity would be back to liberate the colonised country from the invasion of western diachronicity.

A few instances represent western diachronicity in the novel. In fact, it is most of the time implicit in Nnaife’s way of life. Through the narrator’s voice, Emecheta writes: “her husband Nnaife would get up at six in the morning by the clock the master and his wife had given him” (Ibid: 47). The clock given by the white masters to Nnaife links western diachronicity to Lagos. Nnaife was conditioned and controlled by this clock and Nnu Ego hated the way her husband was regulated to wash the British masters’ clothes. Emecheta does not let this go without comment, as the narrator says:

“But every time she saw her husband hanging out the white woman’s smalls, Nnu Ego would wince as someone in pain. The feeling would cut deeper when, with sickening heart, she heard Nnaife talking effusively about his treatment of dainty clothes and silk. The man was actually proud of his work, she realized” (Ibid: 47).

Nnaife was regulated by the clock and this mechanisation of the Igbo man in Lagos is but a version of emasculation which rendered him useless to his wife. The clock in the novel is the over determined symbol of western time in Lagos. That clock enabled the British coloniser to intrude himself into the intimate life of Nnu Ego and Nnaife. To use “Christmas” as a reference to time by Nnu Ego is also a reference to that western diachronicity and at the same time to Christianity as a religion imposed on the Igbo people in Lagos (Ibid: 85).

CONCLUSIONS

Through her use of English, Emecheta recognises that her ‘Africaness’ had been diluted as a result from her constant contact and use of English. This fact is considered as a tragedy, a “de-africanisation” by Ojo-Ade, a “slavery of language” by Ngugi or as a “nauseating illness” by Fanon (in Ojo-Ade, 1991: 16). However while using academic English,

Emecheta surpasses criticism upon whether the language used in her literature is good or bad, worth analysing or not.

NOTES

i The Igbo people (called Ibo by the English) inhabit South Eastern Nigeria. They caught world attention for a while as chief protagonists of the Biafran tragedy. Igbo is both the people and the language (Achebe, 1995: 93).

ii This ideology includes the literary convention and stylistic stances adopted by the writer. For Eaglton it includes many levels, namely, “theories of literature, critical practices, literary traditions, genres, conventions, devices and discourses” (in Ngara, 1985: 108).

iii “There is a victory of Realism only when great realist writers establish a profound and serious, if not fully conscious, association with a progressive current in the evolution of mankind” (Lukàs, 1978: 85).

iv The African woman writer recognizes that “along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy” (Ogunyemi, 1985: 64). Womanism, as defined by Ogunyemi, is to recognize in a Black woman writing, in addition to the aspect of sexism, the impact of racism, neo-colonialism, economic instability and psychological disorientation on Africans’ lives. In such literary writings, one notices the predominance of the demands of native culture over the demands of sexual politics (Ibid: 64-6).

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