



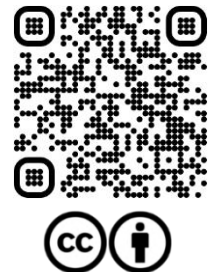
Education, Sisterhood and Solidarity in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994)

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Abstract— Facing patriarchal African societies where men were empowered at the expense of women, the main concern of African female writers of the first and second generations has chiefly been the restoration of the social condition of the African woman. The male-oriented perspectives in African male writings did not align with African women writers'. So as a response, these female writers started coming up with a new type of female characters whose stories are woven from their own experience and milieu. One of those novels is Emecheta's *Kehinde* (1994) where the heroine, after living in London for eighteen years, joined her husband in Lagos, could no longer bear the brunt of life she was expected to lead as a woman and wife in a Nigerian patriarchal society. Consequently, she was compelled to return to England. One may wonder what solutions Buchi Emecheta proposes in order to help Nigerian women in particular and African women in general improve their living conditions in a male-dominated African society. From a feminist perspective, this article will deal with The Empowerment of Women in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*. Based on sociology, culture, psychology and feminism, this study will first analyze the importance of women's education and then will examine Emecheta's advocacy for solidarity among women.



Keywords— feminism ; empowerment ; women ; patriarchal ; education ; solidarity

I. INTRODUCTION

Facing patriarchal African societies where men were empowered at the expense of women, the main concern of African female writers of the first and second generations has chiefly been the restoration of social condition of the African woman. The male-oriented perspectives in African male writings in ways which did not align with African women writers'. The image of women in the literary production of African men writers was mainly that of submission, subordination to and bondage to men. As a result, Flora Nwapa, for example, declared : "Often writers present African women as beasts of burden, down-trodden, and all that. This is not altogether true. Writers have not bothered to write about women as they really are. Their lives are taken for granted. [...]"¹. So as a response, female writers depicted in their novels a new prototype of African

woman who no longer accepted to be victimized by patriarchal norms, influenced, as she was, by modernity, Western culture and social structure. One of these female empowerment novels is Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*, published in 1994. One can also recall Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), *One is Enough* (1981), *Women are Different* (1986), Buchi Emecheta's *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *Double Yoke* (1981), Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1973), Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1979), Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (1994), to mention but a few.

This paper zeroes in on *Kehinde*. The eponymous heroine, after living in London for eighteen years, joined her husband in Lagos, could no longer bear the brunt of life she was expected to lead as a woman and wife in a Nigerian patriarchal society and consequently was compelled to

¹ Flora Nwapa interviewed by Austa Uwechue, *Africa Woman*, 10, July-August 1997, p. 9

return to England. One may wonder what solutions Buchi Emecheta proposes in order to help Nigerian women in particular and African women in general improve their living conditions in a male-dominated African society.

From a feminist perspective, this article will deal with *The Empowerment of Women in Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde* (1994). According to Filomina Steady (1981 ; 35-36), "True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant. The majority of black women in Africa and in the Diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice." As for Ifi Amadiume (1987 ; 10), feminism is "a political consciousness by women, which leads to a strong sense of self-awareness, self-esteem, female solidarity and, consequently, the questioning and the challenging of gender inequalities in social systems and institutions."

Based on sociology, culture, psychology and feminism, this study will first analyze the importance of women's education and then will examine Buchi Emecheta's advocacy for solidarity among women.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION

In *Kehinde*, Buchi Emecheta presents a woman, Kehinde, who had lived for eighteen years in London before joining her husband, Albert, in Lagos after he preceded her in the Nigerian economic capital city two years previously. When she returned to Lagos, the heroine could not believe her eyes: within two years, Albert has taken a second wife who has given him a son and is now carrying his child. Although being a fervent monogamist, Kehinde has to share her husband now with another woman. As if that was not enough as ordeal for her, her two sisters-in-law keep violating the privacy of her marital life. Also, the heroine cannot find an employment because she lacks a good training and, consequently, she has to depend, financially, on Albert. Kehinde becomes so impoverished by her new situation that she does not even have the ticket home to London. On the contrary, the social condition of Albert's second wife, Rike, is good and she is held in high esteem by her husband because she is a university teacher and is economically autonomous. As Kehinde could not cope with the new situation any more, she wrote a letter to her friend Moriammo who did not delay to help her go back to the United Kingdom.

The truth is that the Nigeria Kehinde had in mind while she was in Britain, is different from the one she discovers during her stay in Lagos. The Nigeria she discovers is a place where education and degrees are the only prerequisite for getting a job. It is contrary to England where professional experience is taken into account as far

as employing people is concerned. This is by the way the reason why she considers that women must get educated in order to live independently in a society dominated by men. Her daughter, Bimpe, regrets the fact that education is regarded as an essential means to survive in Africa. And the expression "neurotic about certificates" she uses referring to her compatriots, shows her annoyance at how much they cling to education.

So the fact that Kehinde relies financially on Albert is one of the causes of her plight during her stay in Lagos. Her elder sister, Ifeyinwa, with her "numerous" children, is also dependent on her husband. Thus, her condition is worsened: "Ifeyinwa was thinner than when she was young, not fashionably so but worn down by poverty." (1994 ; 73). In the letter which Kehinde sent to Moriammo, she talks of her elder sister as a dependent wife: "You'd like her, but looking at her, you'd think marriage was a prison. She looks about as healthy as a two-day old chick caught in the rain." (1994 ; 94). Another physical description of Ifeyinwa is given by Kehinde's sister-in-law, Mama Kaduna, not without wickedness and humour: "Look at that tiny girl that a rat would eat and still want some more." (1994 ; 73). Ifeyinwa is in poor living accommodations: she shares only two rooms with her husband, her two co-wives and their children. Unlike the two sisters, Kehinde's co-wife is there for women to see that their education improves their living conditions. Rike's lot is completely different from that of Ifeyinwa and Kehinde in Lagos. She has a maid and she uses gas instead of firewood for her cooking. Her education and good economic situation are two of the reasons why Albert has married her.

The influence of Rike over her husband is undeniable. After gaining Albert's love, she takes him frequently to her church which she succeeds finally in converting him to. Striving to please his second wife, a PhD holder in literature, Albert is obliged to spare time for reading a book despite his busy work. Albert goes as far in his weakness towards Rike as giving her the best part of the furniture Kehinde bought from England. As a matter of fact, this injustice of Albert towards his senior wife is on the basis of Ifeyinwa's anger and vengeance against Rike. And the fact that Kehinde could only see Albert in her room on the third night after her arrival from London evidences the influence of Rike over her husband. The problem is that if Albert's social condition in Lagos is improved, it is greatly thanks to Rike who has helped him to find a good employment.

As a university teacher, Rike is not an illiterate traditional African woman in an African society where the majority of females do not have access to education. According to Ifeyinwa, this academic knowledge and the birth of her baby boy, Ogochukwu, are the main reasons

why Albert has married Rike: “Few men would say no to such an educated woman once she’d had a man-child for them.” (1994 ; 71). Even if the university graduate accepts to marry Kehinde’s husband because he comes from Europe. Ifeyinwa makes it clear, through this quotation, that Albert too gets something out of his second marriage. In other words, Albert expects that Rike will help him financially.

During all the eighteen years she has lived in London, Kehinde has tried to play the good and submissive Igbo woman who is ready to serve men and happy to nurture her children. However, this effort to comply with her people’s beliefs is changed by what she discovers when she joins Albert in Lagos. After the independence and the European individualistic life she has enjoyed in London, Kehinde finds it unbearable that in Lagos she has to share her husband with another woman, to depend financially on him and to cope with the interference of her sisters-in-law in her wedlock. As a result, she girds up her loins and resolves to part with Albert before she returns to Britain. She is proud of herself now as she seems to be claiming her right. According to her, leaving her husband in order to lead a peaceful life which is devoid of any external pressure does not make her less of a woman but rather it makes her more human.

After returning to London, Kehinde is faced with difficult social conditions. For instance, she has difficulty in finding a good job. But she is determined to satisfy her children (particularly her daughter Bimpe) who also want to return to England. She is determined to take care of herself and solve her own problems as well. Being aware of the fact that Albert’s second wife does not have to undergo the lot of many African women which is characterized by poverty thanks to her education, Kehinde studied hard and succeeded in getting a degree in sociology. This degree is of great use to her since it has enabled her to get a respectable job at the Department of Social Services. Living as a concubine with a Caribbean man by the name of Michael Gibson, Kehinde is not embarrassed by the rumors from her compatriots who say that Michael is homosexual. Nor is she disturbed in this affair by the presence of her grown up son Joshua.

One cannot focus on women’s education in *Kehinde* without mentioning Mary Elikwu. Living in London, Mary Elikwu leaves her husband when she realizes that he no longer loves her and assumes her bold act among her Nigerian compatriots who purely and simply marginalize her. In fact, she leaves her husband because the latter beats her. Her decision is all the more courageous as she has to take care of her six children in a foreign country where it is costly for parents to raise children. It is important to specify

here that if Albert has been compelled to make Kehinde abort her third child in order to save the money it is because he and his wife have to pay to child minders. Likewise, Leah the white girl Kehinde has shared room with at the clinic, has aborted her baby against her will because she cannot afford to take care of it.

Separated from her husband, rejected by her compatriots and worried by the education of her children, Mrs Elikwu is determined to show people particularly the Igbos that parting from one’s husband does not prevent one from being a good and respectable woman. First of all, she is not much bothered by her present matrimonial situation, which can be evidenced by the party she organized just after buying a sewing machine. Secondly, she sees to it that her children get a good education, which is also evidenced by the short conversation Kehinde has snatched with one of them over the telephone. As a matter of fact, the said conversation has revealed the politeness of Mrs Elikwu’s children. Finally, she is herself well educated. Besides, According to Emecheta, girls’ education is a stepping stone towards women’s economic independence and advocacy.

Mary Elikwu’s efforts to refuse exploitation are rewarded by the publication of a children’s book of myths and legends. The publication of this book has made her famous in London where she is a spokesperson for the “Milk for our babies” campaign. It is significant to mention that while Mary Elikwu is propelled in front of other women by her education and determination, Kehinde who used to look down on her simply because she has left her husband, is in distress. Only in her distress could Kehinde ponder Mary Elikwu’s foresight, that is to say women can rely on themselves to live peacefully in a male-dominated world. Even if Mrs Elikwu is a separated woman, she has shown her compatriots that this status of hers does not mean that she cannot stand up to married women as far as good womanhood is concerned.

Emecheta shows that life offers women other joys than motherhood or wifehood. For instance, after leaving her husband in Lagos, Kehinde leads her own life in London where she is determined not to undergo any more the sexual exploitation of many African women. She does not deny the joys a woman can have by staying with her husband. Nevertheless, she indicates that women, ought to get educated at first in order to be financially independent of their husbands like Rike. Even if she is not living with Albert, it cannot be denied that Kehinde is leading, socially speaking, a better life than women such as Ifeyinwa who are living under the same shade as their husbands.

Kehinde reminds of another novel by Emecheta, *Double Yoke* (1982), where the heroine’s mother encourages her daughter to go to university. In fact, when

Nko asked her mother whether she should go to this institution or not, the older woman pointed out to her the advantages of getting a university education:

You have been to see your man friend at that place. You have seen that people who went to such places came out better equipped financially to cope with this expensive country. You have also seen that without money no one is respected here anymore. (95)

So she resolved to get a good degree and eventually find a good employment at all costs. This is one reason why she submitted several times to Professor Ikot who blackmailed her into sleeping with him while he was supervising her work. Thus, she did not care anymore about compromising her relationship with her boyfriend, Ete Kamba, whom she intended to marry. Even though, Nko tries to keep her head above a severe economic system that constantly keeps her down and where there is no compromise for women, she treads on the ethical norms that govern African society. To Nko, the ends justify the means as she uses her "bottom power" against Professor Ikot to be professionally eligible.

In addition to education, Buchi Emecheta exhorts African women to cultivate the sense of solidarity and to help one another so as to better their living conditions with a responsive moral vision.

III. ADVOCATING SOLIDARITY AMONG WOMEN

The relationship between Kehinde and her two sisters-in-law and the way Mary Elikwu is not well appreciated by other Igbo immigrant women in London. This illustrates the subjugation and bone of contention among women. The sisters-in-law, Aunt Mary and Aunt Selina, are on the basis of the female protagonist's difficult situation. As a matter of fact, they pressed their brother to come back home and considered that it was time for Albert to return to Lagos after eighteen years abroad. In reality, Albert's sisters had grown to be jealous of their sister-in-law's easy life in London characterized by her independence from her husband. Whereas they, Aunt Mary and Aunt Selina, are leading the precarious life of many women in the African society; a life characterized by poverty. Albert's return to Lagos can be regarded as a victory of his sisters upon Kehinde because they have succeeded in snatching him from her grip. They are

conscious that by doing so they have deprived the latter of her pride because, in their community, people believe that a respectable woman should not part from her husband.

Buchi Emecheta, through the relationship between Kehinde and Moriammo and Kehinde's regretting her former attitude towards Mary Elikwu, shows that women should show solidarity towards one another in order to overcome their troubles usually brought about by men and sometimes by their women neighbours. After benefiting from her husband's love and protection for almost sixteen years, Kehinde has lost both of them all of a sudden on account of Albert's impromptu decision to go back to his native country. In her distress, Kehinde has only one confident: Moriammo. She is her confident but she is also, beside Taiwo (Kehinde's spirit twin sister), her adviser and attendant. By coming to the clinic just after Kehinde's abortion so as to know about the latter's health and to console her, Moriammo shows that her friendship with Albert's wife is sincere. And her gesture is all the more significant as Kehinde's husband is not concerned about his wife's health, blinded as he is by his desire to go back to Nigeria. The man does not really feel his authority over his wife in Europe. So he cannot wait to retrieve his lost pride back to Lagos.

Another fact which can make the reader admire the relationship between the two Igbo women is that, after being left by her husband in London, Kehinde is not marginalized by her friend. In fact, Moriammo has made it clear to the heroine that a woman living without her husband bothers in the Igbo community in particular: "*Woman wey no get husband na embarrassment for everybody.*" (52). However, Kehinde is not an embarrassment to Moriammo. If anything, their friendship is as staunch as it was before Albert's departure. And Moriammo's visit at Kehinde's is illustrative in this respect. This visit was an opportunity for Emecheta's female protagonist to confide in Tunde's wife her concerns about Albert's new behaviour which could be sensed in his letters.

Moriammo does not want Kehinde to be entrapped by Albert, that is to keep his wife waiting in London while he is in Nigeria, revelling in his status as a man who has been to Europe and welcoming loose women. That is the reason why she suggests that Kehinde should join her husband in Lagos in order to protect her marriage and her name. According to Moriammo, staying in a foreign country without one's husband means nothing but subjecting oneself to psychological pressures from one's community. Moriammo's advice is all the more satisfactory to the heroine as it is the same suggestion made by someone Kehinde regards as her wisest adviser: Taiwo.

Since “a friend in need is a friend indeed,” then Moriammo is a friend indeed because only friendship in the real sense of the word can justify her gesture, that is to say sending Kehinde the fare to return to London while the latter needed it very much but could not afford it. Their friendship has resisted time and space. After twelve months and from London where she is (Kehinde is in Lagos), Moriammo still considers Kehinde her friend in spite of Tunde’s intrusion. They have shown once again the positive nature of their relationship. After the incident that put Tunde and his wife away from Kehinde, the latter went back to Nigeria without informing Moriammo. So if the likes of Tunde had bargained for a definite end to their relationship, it is because they do not really know its steadiness. On the one hand, Kehinde did not hesitate to address a letter to Moriammo when she was in distress. On the other hand, Tunde’s wife knows Kehinde enough to read between the lines of the letter and understand that her friend wanted to be helped out.

Here, Buchi Emecheta’s plea is reminiscent of Mariama Ba’s in *So Long a Letter* (1979). In this novel, Modou Fall takes a second wife and abandons his first one, Ramatoulaye, and their twelve children. Modou’s desertion makes life very difficult for Ramatoulaye and her offspring. For example, the children are now compelled to face the difficulties of public transport to go to school and come back home. The heroine is all the more saddened by her new situation as she “*does not have the means to change the course of events.*” (53). Therefore, like Kehinde, Ramatoulaye writes a letter to her friend, Aïssatou, in order to confide in her and therefore alleviate her suffering:

I told you then, without any ulterior motive, of this painful aspect of our life, while Modou’s car drove Lady Mother-in-law to the four corners of town and while Binetou streaked along the roads in an Alfa Romeo, sometimes white, sometimes red.

I shall never forget your response, you, my sister, nor my joy and my surprise when I was called to the Fiat agency and was told to choose a car which you had paid for, in full. My children

gave cries of joy when they learned of the approaching end of their tribulations, which remain the daily lot of a good many other students. (53-54)

Like Kehinde and Moriammo, Ramatoulaye and Aïssatou are living on different continents: the former is in Africa, precisely in Senegal, whereas the latter has left Senegal and is living in the United States. The gestures of Moriammo and Aïssatou are different in nature but they have the same purpose: to help out the recipients.

By helping the heroine to go back to Britain where she becomes a university graduate, Moriammo has contributed to Kehinde’s education, which is transformative in women’s struggle. Actually, Kehinde had never put up with the privilege of her co-wife over her.

Through the letters the two Igbo women have sent to each other, Emecheta shows how two African women have managed to safeguard their friendship despite harsh traditional norms that degrade woman’s value. Tunde is the one who attempted to separate the two friends, but Kehinde is indicating that he represents the majority of African men: “*Why do our husbands feel threatened when a woman shows signs of independence by wanting to live alone for a while?*” (92). So conscious that African women are often victims of superstitions of this kind, Emecheta gives Kehinde and Moriammo as role models for women. Previously separated by Tunde, they are clear-headed enough to become reconciled because this man who had tried to put an end to their relationship is no more alive. What we learn through the death of Tunde is that Kehinde and particularly Moriammo would have only themselves to blame had they let him divide them.

The solidarity between Kehinde and Moriammo is also significant in the sense that they are not only role models for women but they are also the representatives of two confessions namely Christianity and Islam in a country where Christians and Muslims are at daggers drawn. Through the female protagonists, Kehinde and Moriammo, Emecheta is hinting at the necessity for African women to develop the sense of solidarity and sisterhood in order to overcome the tribulations to which they are subjected by their society.

Kehinde’s regretting her former attitude to Mary Elikwu is also indicative of the necessity for women to stick together. Mary Elikwu is an Igbo woman who has left her husband and who is living in London with her six kids. But she is banished by her Igbo compatriots simply because she lives without her husband: “*To the men in their circle, she*

was a curiosity, to the women, a kind of challenge. To *Kehinde* she was a fallen woman who had no sense of decorum." (38). To understand this attitude of Mary Elikwu's compatriots in London, one should at first know the Igbo customs. As a matter of fact, Ibo people believe that a woman who chooses to divorce her husband challenges the societal norms. So according to these people, a good woman should always keep her husband no matter how bad the behaviour of the latter is, for only a bad woman leaves her husband. However, Mary Elikwu has not heeded her people on this matter, which has aroused their hostile attitude towards her.

In fact, through *Kehinde's* rude behaviour towards Mary Elikwu and the latter's reaction during Albert's leave-taking party in London, Emecheta has made it clear that women such as Mary Elikwu are misunderstood by their people. In effect, after being well dressed for the party, *Kehinde* did not know that Mary Elikwu was complimenting her, but she saw only jealousy and envy in the words of the divorced woman. The fact is that some Ibos such as *Kehinde* are so absorbed in traditional beliefs that they don't try and find out the actual reasons which can prompt some women to leave their husbands. *Kehinde* believes that women such as Mrs Elikwu are not fit to be associated with: "*O Moriammo, be serious. Alby no dey allow me to associate with such women. We no get anything in common!*" (12). Through these words, one can notice that some men make their wives believe that separated women must be shunned. And Moriammo's husband, Tunde, will show later that he is of the same mind as Albert on the matter when the latter leaves *Kehinde* alone in London.

The celebration of *Kehinde's* birthday has made her realize that if she was held in high esteem by her compatriots, it was only thanks to Albert's company. Now that he has left London for Lagos, she does not see her people any more. Even Tunde and Moriammo whom she and Albert consider their friends were not present at the birthday party. One should mention that Moriammo did not go at *Kehinde's* because her husband had forbidden her to be there. *Kehinde's* new situation has brought her to think deeply about the embarrassing conditions in which women such as the white woman she saw on her way to the clinic, Mary Elikwu and even widows live. She has pondered the courage, the independence of Mrs. Elikwu; that is why she tried in vain to give her a call so as to atone for her bad behaviour towards the independent woman.

IV. CONCLUSION

Buchi Emecheta, in *Kehinde*, has stressed the empowerment of women through the depiction of female characters of a new type. Contrary to what the reader used

to see in the literary texts of African male writers of the first generation where female characters were often uneducated and dependent wives, the Nigerian novelist has portrayed women who are remarkable for their education and independence. Whereas *Kehinde*, in Lagos, depends on her husband because she lacks a good qualification and therefore is ineligible for an employment, her co-wife, Rike, is a university teacher and has a good social condition. The situation of *Kehinde's* elder sister, Ifeyinwa, and her two co-wives is worse in the sense that they live in decrepit and tiny accommodations with their husband and "numerous" children. *Kehinde*, Ifeyinwa and her co-wives would not have been in this plight if they had got the required certificates or even if they had Rike's education. Mary Elikwu is also another example which evidences the importance of women's education.

Thus, when she goes back to London, the heroine resumes studying until she gets a PhD and her lot is considerably improved. So Emecheta calls upon women to get educated to better their condition. *Kehinde* would probably not have achieved her goal had Moriammo not helped her out, which shows that getting educated and being autonomous economically are not enough for the empowerment of women. They also need to stick together in a man's world. *Kehinde* and Moriammo seem to have understood this insofar as neither Tunde nor the distance which separates the two friends could tear them apart. Emecheta's call upon women to show solidarity towards one another is made through the heroine's new opinion of Mary Elikwu as well. This woman is singled out and stigmatized among the Igbo community in London, including the heroine herself, because she has left her husband. *Kehinde* considered Mary Elikwu as a fallen woman without even trying first to understand the reasons for her divorce. Hence, the importance of the situation of *Kehinde* who is shunned by her Igbo kins because her husband has left her in London to go back to Lagos for good. Now she regrets her attitude in the direction of Mary Elikwu. Therefore, women must also unite, for there is strength in unity, as the saying goes.

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