



Voices in the Compound: Celebration of Female Identity in Buchi Emecheta's London based Novels

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All I ever wanted was to tell stories from my home, just like my big mother Nwakwaluzo used to tell stories in her very own compound with her back leaning against the *ukwa* tree.

— — Buchi Emecheta, *Head Above Water* (242)

Buchi Emecheta is remembered diversely as a Black British writer, a Nigerian novelist and a Feminist committed to the cause of 'feminism with a small "f"'. Being brought up in a family where most women were gifted story-tellers, Emecheta's penchant for stories as she mentions it in her autobiography, seems only natural. What this confession from an immigrant, Anglophone Nigerian novelist deliberately simplifies however, is the implicit dialectics of oral and scribal narrative conventions that inevitably shape her identity as a story-teller; a dialectics that does not present itself in case of her big mother's beloved renditions in her village compound. The taste of letters introduced by the British imperial education and the subsequent migration to the former empire itself had entailed a metamorphosis of the Igbo 'story-teller' into an Anglophone, Britain based Nigerian novelist. Through ascribing the power of the written word or 'logos' to the enchanting voice of the story-teller, Emecheta claims to be able to bring women's voices to a larger audience beyond that consisting of her native women in Ibusa. It is the urge to reach out to a wider international audience that characterises the ambition of the migrant woman writer, who while writing, suffers a triple burden of being Black, female and a migrant separated from the comfort of a natal home. Emecheta makes this struggle to find an authorial identity on the part of the female immigrant the very cornerstone of her two autobiographical novels, *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen*. The concern however is shared implicitly by all her London novels, irrespective of the vocation of her female protagonists.

Emecheta's oeuvre beginning with the documentation of her own lived experiences comprises today, a body of vividly dialogic narratives (autobiographical and fictional) on the nature of women's struggles for self-definition in various social settings. In an interview conducted by Oladipo Joseph Ogundele in 1994 Emecheta recognizes her own mission as first and foremost, that of a story-teller committed to telling 'the world our part of the story while using the voices of women' (449). The vivid dialogism of her novels clearly derives from this interface between writing and orature, as well as from the liminality of her own position as a Nigerian woman writing in Britain. Writing as a Black



immigrant woman in Britain, she asserts her identity in an alien world by weaving together strands of fragmented stories, memories, myths and everyday experiences. The unique contribution of her novelistic oeuvre, as this paper argues, is to translate the dialogic character of the African 'compound', a site of social gatherings, story-telling, debates and discussions into the dialogic medium of the Bakhtinian novel.

1. The Compound as a Space:

Traditionally, West African villages had a compound comprising a cluster of houses built around a large space. Individually, the size of a family's compound or 'obi' indicated its wealth. Chinua Achebe for instance, mentions Okwonko's large compound or 'obi' as a mark of prosperity and respectability in *Things Fall Apart*:

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the obi (10).

The spatiality of the compound, however, is more fluid than that suggested by Achebe's description of a place surrounded by huts owned by the patriarch of a polygamous family. In *Head Above Water*, Emecheta's own memories of her aunt's fascinating stories told in Ededemushe's moonlit compound shows the vibrant dialogism of this site in a communal culture. Elleke Boehmer, in her discussion of Nigerian novelist Flora Nwapa's works, emphasises the oft-ignored 'vocality' of the 'women's side of the compound' which transcends the confines of traditionally endorsed gender roles. She writes: "This vocality, rambling and seemingly unstoppable, pulls against the confinements of the women's lives – their market rivalries, their anxieties about husbands, families and children" (98). In West African villages thus, the compound used variously by men, women and children as the site for informal gatherings, nocturnal story-telling sessions and as children's playground becomes a potently dialogic site, a diametrically smaller and more informal version of the bustling 'marketplace'. At the compound as in the marketplace, the world comes together and rewrites itself through strands of stories, songs and anecdotes.

2. The ditch-world:

In *In the Ditch*, Emecheta's first novel, the 'compound' presents itself as a physical locale, that is, an open space more commonly known as the 'courtyard' featuring at the centre of 'Pussy Cat Mansions', one of the Council houses where Emecheta had stayed for a brief while in her early life. In the novel the author's fictional surrogate Adah, a single mother raising five children on her own, takes up residence in one of these Council flats to ensure safety and security for her family. While Welfare housing frees the protagonist from being subject to the whims of exploitative, racist landlords, the novel shows how it obliges her as a State beneficiary to a greater degree of subjection. Not long after her arrival thus, Adah learns that her newly acquired 'independence', 'freedom' and 'peace of mind' (19) will be under strict State supervision at the Mansions. The design of the Mansions too, is apt to accommodate this need with respect to every resident family. The 'Pussy Cat Mansions', a block of nearly one hundred and forty flats built around a large courtyard, is strategically designed



by the State for housing its deviant subjects. The position of the flats, along with the central location of the social worker Carol's office in the 'compound' enables the authorities to exercise a bureaucratic regimentation of space, ensuring thus, a constant supervision of its tenants, the so-called 'problem families'. In this way the Mansion's 'compound' apparently functions in a manner which is totally antithetical to the manner in which the village compound functions in pre-colonial Igboland. A comprehensive reading of the novel however, allows the reader to simultaneously reimagine the Mansion's 'compound', not as a surveillance centre, but as an alternative 'third space'. Existing neither as a replication of the spatiality of the West African 'compound', nor as the materialization of a State Panopticon, it is seen, rather, as a transformation of both spaces into what Homi Bhabha terms as a "'newness' of migrant or minority discourse", a newness that is not part of the "'progressivist' division between past and present, or the archaic and the modern" (325).

This new space, termed as the 'ditch world' where Adah and her creator Emecheta had found themselves in their early lives, redefines London's metropolitan life from an alternative lens. The ditch-world, beyond its utilitarian function of housing the city's troublesome 'others' (the poor, the invalid, immigrants and broken families) evolves into a constellation of social relations that disrupts the original plan of the authorities by generating what John McLeod in *Postcolonial London* calls new 'affiliative' networks. Such networks inevitably cut across the 'filial' networks that bind individuals to a totalizing structure in a condition of abject dependency (95). The ditch-dwellers, mostly single mothers raising families with state aid, are a heterogeneous group comprising Irish, Caribbean and Nigerian immigrants as well as British women and those of multiracial origin born in Britain. In essence, they present a microcosm of London's multicultural tradition that was increasingly threatened by racist and segregationist policies in Post War Britain. This forgotten image of London as an inclusive urban space provides a resistant counter-narrative to the popular essentialist models of belonging based on class, race, ethnicity or gender that Emecheta's personal experience always made her suspect.

In contrast to the compartmentalised urban spaces encountered by Emecheta and her fictional counterpart, the ditch-world is fluid, open-ended and ceaselessly dialogic. This unique spatiality undermines on the one hand, any possibility of order, stability and perfection, while on the other hand, it develops a creative scope for dialogic exchanges among its users and inhabitants. In the ditch, the women, divided by race and nationality gossip, abuse each other and banter in a lowly English that at first shocks Adah. She soon learns in course of her occasional interactions with the officials, however, that fancy words, like fancy clothes, do not agree well with the authorities who want the tenants to look and sound lowly and destitute on all accounts. Vulgar abuses, verbal intimidation and blackmailing are the universally acknowledged passwords for better state entitlements. Gentle words on the contrary bring no hope. As Whoopey, one of Adah's close friends in the Mansions advises her:

You have to whine all the time, and make song and dance of the fact that you're unsupported. The more trouble you make, the more grant you get. If you want to be la-di-da and ladylike with them, you'll get nothing. We are poor, and the bastards want us to look poor (54).



Whoopey's advice that one must use poverty as a tool against itself is reflected in the individual practices of all ditch-dwellers who find consolation in abusing, over-eating, alcoholism or bearing more and more children in defiance of the state's implicit eugenics. While their collective abuse of state aid, both physical and verbal, admits little positive change, it definitely offers dispersed channels of resistance and gratification to individuals living in the community. The dialogic invitation to abuse authorities, share problems and exchange scandal becomes one of the most engaging rituals of the ditch-dwellers who gather daily over endless cups of free coffee at the social worker's office, located in the Mansion's open courtyard. As Emecheta writes: "The little group talked, gossiped and laughed; all were happy. They found joy in communal sorrow" (61).

In the shared space of the ditch, everyone's dreams, like details of their daily lives, become the property of public knowledge; scandals lose their bitter edges and succeed only to entertain. These instances are narrated repeatedly in connection particularly to Whoopey and the widow Mrs Murray, humorously nicknamed 'princess' because of her nostalgic longing for a glorious past. Both Whoopey and Mrs Murray harbour escapist dreams about 'fancy men' (60) and fairy-tale weddings as a way of overcoming the gloomy reality of their lives. In listening to their wildly extravagant fantasies, other women too experience vicarious pleasure and amusement. 'Empty plans' and 'empty dreams' are not out of place in the Mansions' compound, nor are jokes against the same considered unwelcome. Other than sharing empty dreams, jokes and scandal, the ditch-women also stand by one-another in times of crisis. The 'compound', other than serving as a place for idle banter also becomes symbolic of the women's group solidarity. The novel shows ample instances of women being brought together by their common concern over children's well-being. There is for example the episode where Adah and Mrs Ashley help 'Papa Jaja' an old Nigerian man to put his unruly children to bed after his young British wife leaves him in the middle of a cold winter night. When Mrs O'Brien leaves Carol's office to fetch her children from school, she directs her plea of keeping an eye on her youngest child to no one in particular, knowing in her heart that someone or the other would do the needful. Such examples show how inhabitants of the ditch-world, though divided so radically along lines of nationality and race, can come together in times of need. For Adah in particular, the 'affiliative' community of mothers further presents the image of an imagined pre-colonial Igbo community in the heart of England; one where the creative, procreative and nurturing roles of women as mothers, story-tellers and care-givers were accorded high importance. An intimate female space, the ditch-world thus allows its members to coexist in a condition of mutual interdependence, furthering, as Omar Sougou points out in his citation of Nancy Chodorow, "a relational model of feminine selfhood" (34).

3. Voices: The author and her community:

On a personal note, Adah's experiences at the Pussy Cat Mansions are conceived as a necessary prelude to Emecheta's next novel, featuring the phase prior to the 'ditch chapter'. The breaking up of the ditch community proves challenging for the protagonist whose infantile dependence on the community becomes in one way rewarding and in another, inhibitory for her high aspirations as a Black writer in Britain. Adah, unlike some veteran ditch-dwellers, finds her tongue weighed down by the burden of her skin colour and her immigrant status. While the other women swear, bully and defy the officials at ease, Adah finds herself in the ambivalent position of 'young nations seeking



independence' (92) from foreign powers. Although Ogunyemi calls it "ditch of dependence, immaturity, poverty and inferiority" (236) detrimental to a writer's individual identity, she simultaneously pays a tribute to its contribution in Emecheta's journey as a writer 'from invisibility to public gaze'. Adah's emergence as an individual seems complete at the end of the text, in an episode where she defies the racist gestures of a fellow tenant in the community's wash-shed through a bold willful counter-gesture and earns the support of other women in chastising the offender (104-106). This individuation is celebrated as a verbal victory over the opponent, as in countless cases narrated earlier in the text. This verbal victory lays no doubt, the foundations of the individual authorial voice, a voice that would continue beyond the pages of this text into those of Emecheta's subsequent works. This 'voice' that the protagonist discovers at last through the mediation of a plurality of other voices in the novel, finds a more distinctly literary manifestation in her next novel *Second Class Citizen*.

With her second novel *Second Class Citizen*, Emecheta attempts to form a background to the autobiographical experiences narrated in the first novel. This autobiographical novel, bearing ironic echoes from Western bildungsromans like Dickens' *David Copperfield* and sentimental novels like Richardson's *Pamela*, replete with maxims, platitudes and Biblical quotations, seems more self-consciously literary than its predecessor. The singular focus on Adah's pursuit of her dreams, her trials and hardships as a Nigerian immigrant in London, her conjugal problems and her final realisation of her vocation as a writer, makes way for the predominance of the protagonist's voice at the cost of marginalising alternative voices. Amongst the novel's five 'compositional stylistic unities' mentioned by Bakhtin namely, 'direct authorial literary-artistic narration', 'forms of oral everyday narration', 'forms of semi literary (written) everyday narration', 'literary but extra-artistic speech' and finally, the 'stylistically individualised speech of characters' (262); this novel shows a predominance of the first and the fourth components. Whereas the first novel, written from the viewpoint of a sociology student, demonstrates an abundance of what Bakhtin calls 'skaz' ('forms of oral everyday narration') and the 'stylistically individualised speech of characters'; the second novel prioritises a singular narrative voice that is ironic, patronising and at times, overtly sentimentalised. It replaces *In the Ditch's* community of women with Adah's nuclear family and her small group of middle class colleagues.

In the novel, the reader encounters an oddly self-contradictory Adah; one who is petulantly class conscious and naively idealistic, one who condemns patriarchy and yet harbours misogynistic notions. This duality often creates an ironic gap between Adah and her author, even as it merges them in other instances. The divided consciousness of Adah, reflecting the cultural binaries internalised by her author, is resolved at last through the realisation of her vocation as a writer. It is at this climactic point that the novel ties together two important motifs that were only hinted at in the first novel: the quest for an identity and the fulfilment of the creative urge to tell stories through the medium of the novel. It is at this juncture when Adah discovers her creative talent with some encouragement from her colleagues at the Chalk Farm Library that she is able to translate her memories, experiences and opinions from the oral medium to that of the written text. In writing what she terms 'my brainchild' (166), Adah, like her author, feels like "someone talking, talking fast, who would never stop" (165). The emphasis on the spoken word seems to bring the novel, her 'brainchild' very close to Emecheta's memories of stories born orally in the village compounds, amidst a bustling



community of storytellers, listeners and participants and not indeed, in the isolation of a 'room of one's own'.

In his book *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin defines the novel as a "diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised" (262). The novel *The Bride Price*, seen as a debut venture of both the fictional Adah and her author seems to approach this condition of dialogism at the time of its genesis. Although the manuscript in both cases was burnt by the vindictive husbands, it plays an important role in fashioning Adah or Emecheta's identity as an immigrant Nigerian writer. *The Bride Price*, Emecheta's first attempted novel appears in Adah's story to have its genesis in diverse narratives; both oral and written, biographical and literary. It is shaped as such, by the conditions of orality as well as the more formal literary conventions of the written 'text'. That it is not an easy venture to try and write something in 'English' which is African in spirit, is made conspicuous in Adah's dilemma:

She could not write in any African language, so it must be English although English was not her mother tongue. Yes, it was the English language that she was going to use. But she could not write those big long twisting words. Well, she might not be able to do those long difficult words, but she was going to do her own phrases her own way. Adah's phrases, that's what they were going to be. (166)

In her attempt to master the language of the coloniser to the purpose of using it as a tool to express her own perspective of the world and its people; Adah mentions the Bible and Shakespeare as two simplest sources. While she never ceased to be fascinated by Shakespeare's literary contributions, as a child she had been simultaneously trained to learn the words of the Bible by heart. She acknowledges the role of her beloved Pa in teaching her how to read the Bible. The memory of words however, goes beyond the domain of a literate culture and points towards the popular oral tradition of Bible recitations and hymn singing among the Igbo people way back, ever since the early days of European colonisation. The memory of the Bible, as much as the shape of its printed words, exist alongside Adah's memories of her own childhood. Literary output however, depends as much on the immediacy of the lived world as on the remembrance of things past. Unlike the figure of the story-teller, the modern writer thus, cannot solely depend upon memory and eloquent communication skills to achieve eminence amongst her audience, comprising oddly heterogeneous people scattered across the globe, unlike the compact audience of the story-teller or the minstrel. The novelist must not only reflect the voices of real people, but also integrate them aesthetically into her vision of the world. As Adah muses about the correct discipline that 'teaches people about people' (167), citing psychology, anthropology, history and finally sociology, the reader gets an early impression of the immensely dialogic scope of Emecheta's novels which celebrate the variety and multiplicity of women's voices in diverse social settings. For Adah in both novels, as it is for a writer, self-knowledge and self-fulfilment can only be made possible through a persistent awareness of the existence and the contribution of 'others' in one's life.

An evaluation of the creative potentials of Adah's unpublished 'brainchild' becomes more relevant, when read in the context of Emecheta's dedicatory lines in *Second Class Citizen*. As in the case of the fictional Adah, Emecheta claims to have written her novel listening to the 'sweet



background noises' of her children, without which the book may not have been possible. Through her reference to background noises of the children, her potential adult readers-in-making, Emecheta's dedication draws the attention of her readers to one of the most important requisites for a writer, that is, the presence of a community of listeners without whose nurturing role the 'brainchild' can never be brought into the world. In *Second Class Citizen* this nurturing, maternal role is offered by Adah's colleagues in the Chalk Farm Library who encourage and provide her with valuable feedback, giving her the strength to hold fast to her dream. Contrary to Francis who destroys the book that poses a threat to his authoritative position as the patriarch, the Canadian Bill provides encouragement to Adah. It is he who first gives the name 'brainchild' to the book that Francis dismisses as 'rubbish'. It is the Chalk Farm Library, more than any other space in London, that provides Adah the double benefits of financial security as well as recreation. John McLeod observes that the library becomes an alternative postcolonial space which exists at an interface between the 'concrete and the invented' (101). The library brings Adah in touch with writers like James Baldwin, Flora Nwapa and Karl Marx. It is here at this heterotopic locale that Bill, a White Canadian introduces Adah to James Baldwin, a Black American writer whose works further make Adah aware of the idea that 'Black was beautiful' (152), giving her the courage to write her own story as a Black woman. Although that story is eventually burnt to ashes, her awareness of being a potential author cannot be destroyed at the end. The library with its liberal ideals, its vivid dialogism and its nurturing transcultural affiliations becomes an alternative to the nostalgically remembered village compound and its rich oral community lost in transit. Its immense contribution to the author's successful self-fashioning as a Black British woman writer is indicated in the following lines: "Librarianship was to her simply a stepping stone to bring her nearer to the books she dreamt she was going to write in the future, when she was forty" (168). It indicates much more than a desire for passive consumption of bookish knowledge. What it embraces rather, is a penchant to voice forth the female 'self' and its stories to the world.

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