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INTERVIEW WITH BUCHI EMECHETA

Buchi Emecheta is a well known Nigerian Novelist whose talk, 'Have Women Progressed', given at UCLA in November 1987, provided UFAHAMU the opportunity to conduct this interview. The interviewer, Joyce Boss, is a member of the editorial board.

On Cultural and Linguistic Issues.

JB: One of the criticisms leveled against Alice Walker, in The Color Purple, is that she presents the end results of oppression without diachronic analysis, without looking at the root causes of that oppression. Would it be fair if the same were said of your works?

BE: Well, I don't know. I think it's really left for the critics. As a writer, you just write books, and then the critics start analyzing what it ought to do or what ought to have been put in it, which doesn't enter the writer's mind [when she's writing].

JB: So in writing, you go by the writer's sense rather than the critic's analyses?

BE: Yes. In fact, sometimes you just write a story, and it's when the critics come to analyze it that you know what you've done. But as far as you're concerned, you have just written it. You just write the story, and when other people come to read it, they read something else into it which you didn't intend.

JB: Do you feel all interpretations are equally valid?

BE: [The interpretation] depends on the cultural background of the interpreter. When people evaluate a book, they usually do so according to their own culture, which may not be the same as the writer's.

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JB: In all of your books, we see the difficult situations encountered by women who challenge what is traditionally expected of them. Is there a point which saying "no" to those expectations becomes a denial or betrayal of one's culture?

BE: It can't be. In my own case, I might say, "I'm all right in England; I have everything I need, my children are here--why should I go back?" But even though my own parents are not alive, I feel there is this thing inside of me which says, I must go there, I must share. It's part of you. To completely say "no" to that culture would be a denial of my own personality, as an individual. I go to the village more often than some people who are in Lagos. [Laughs]

JB: So for you, the ties are still strong?

BE: Yes they're still there. Even though [in Nigeria] I don't like the oppression, the way women's achievements are pushed down--I don't like that. But there are many things in that culture that you don't get in Western culture.

JB: In regards to culture and cultural background, you write in English, which you have told us is your fourth language. If you are writing in English, which is an alien language for many Nigerians, do you think you can aim to educate or reach them writing in this language?

BE: Yes, you can. Most people in Nigeria speak English; even though it is an alien language we speak it. You can't write in a Nigerian language, because Nigeria has something like 249 languages. If you write in one, you just write to a small group of people.

JB: Whom do you see as your audience? When you are writing, whom do you see as those you are trying to reach?

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BE: I try to reach everybody who can read English, and I try to write about Africa as my base for everybody who can read English.

JB: Some other writers see a problem in writing in English, because it came as a language of colonial oppression. . .

BE: I know you're talking about Ngugi wa Thiong'o; he's my neighbor in London. He wrote in his own language, but he's brought out Devil on the Cross in English because he found that writing in English should be all right due to its wide appeal. Even with Petals of Blood, he had to bring out an English edition.

On Women and Empowerment

JB: An interesting point you brought up in your talk yesterday is the question of whether women have progressed. You say that in some ways, women are going around in circles, but it seems you see education as a way out of that circle.

BE: Yes, that is the key. Once a woman is educated up to a certain level, then she will have the confidence to communicate with her sister outside of that culture, and be able to compare notes. And maybe they can learn from each other. Until that is available to almost all women, we will be going around in circles.

JB: There is a very poignant scene in the beginning of The Joys of Motherhood where you describe how a female slave is killed after the death of the senior wife, and how the other women of the village look away. They don't wish to participate.

BE: Yes. But they didn't stop it. They didn't say anything, which I feel is the situation of powerlessness. That situation is something which still exists. The funniest thing is, when it actually comes to the act [in traditions which oppress women], there's no men around. It's all women, but they just say, "okay, just go through

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with it, it won't take time." They don't want it. The person who's taking part doesn't want it. But they say, "let's just do it, "because they fear that one woman may go tell the men. Still, they don't like what is happening. If a man's wife dies he generally mourns for 40 days, but a widow would have to mourn for 7 or 9 months, wear black, and she wouldn't go into other people's houses; so many restrictions which don't apply to the men.

JB: You say that these days the women dislike some of these traditional things. Was this dislike there before?

BE: It wasn't as sharp as it is now. I know this, because my brother just died, and my sister and a very young girl had to go through this. I was at home, and I kept shouting that I didn't want her to go through these things, because she had very many children. And her mother kept saying, "I don't want people to abuse my daughter" And I said, "They are not abusing your daughter." So she said, "It is because you live over there. They may discriminate against her here, start giving her children names." Anyway, that is an example. The women don't agree with what is done, but they say, "Let's do it, because we don't want people to say we didn't do this." But it's changing gradually.

JB: I wanted to ask you about the heroines in your books. You said yesterday that Debbie in Destination Biafra is one kind of ideal African woman that you picture. . .

BE: A dream woman, yes.

JB: But when you said that, I couldn't help but think of characters such as Siegbo and the other elder women in The Rape of Shavi who, in the "Women's War," take strong action directly, without malice, but which in fact kills the man who committed the rape. Recognizing that this novel is mythic or even allegorical in many ways, do you think that kind of power exists within women?

BE: I think it does. That's what I was saying yesterday about the women of South Africa. I like to support the ANC, but when it comes to actual killing, I can't do it. The trouble you take raising a child to become a young woman and having that child killed, or that young man killed--I'm a coward when it comes to that. So when I have women characters do things like that, in Debbie's case for example, I can't even bring myself to say she was going to die. I just let it happen that way, so that it appears to have been out of her hands; and in *The Rape of Shavi* the same thing. I can't bring those women to actually say, "Okay, this is our war, we have to kill that man"-- I can't bring myself to do that. But we had, for instance, the Aba riots, when women refused to pay taxes; it was the British who shot them. They didn't kill a single white man. But the British killed 60 of them. This happened in 1949. But still they achieved their end, and the British people left the area. It's a different use of power. In the area of Nigeria where Achebe comes from, the women can say "We are not going to cook tonight." All the women will go on strike, and use that to achieve certain things.

JB: Is that sort of power always enough to achieve ends?

BE: It's slower, but . . . I don't think killing is quite right. Once a person is born, he or she has the same rights that I do. When it comes to any sort of killing, I know I can't do that.

JB: You talked a little bit yesterday about the psychological entrapment of women, where they are raised with certain expectations, and so they also raise their daughter and sons with those same expectations. In your books, as we've discussed, you portray women who challenge and overcome those expectations. Does this always necessitate some sort of Western element--a university education, for example--or is there a possibility for a thoroughly African-woman-defined concept of self-fulfillment?

BE: I think it is a matter of broadening your horizons. For example, at the [United Nations-sponsored] Nairobi Women's Conference,

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many of the Kenyan and Ugandan women who came had never been out of their villages before, and their lives will never be the same again. I was not there, but the people who went told me that some of the women who came were peasants, and they had to translate the conference to their level, but the experience of seeing so many women from all over the world--the joy, the happiness--their lives can't be the same. This sort of process doesn't necessarily mean breaking with what you have, but it means viewing what you have in a new light. You start questioning your own beliefs. The actual contact with women outside your culture will start making you think, "Are these things that we do really necessary?" You can start talking about things which people never talked about before, and start looking for solutions.

JB: Do you think there is any thing or things in particular which African women can teach other women of the world?

BE: I think maybe this sense of community spirit. But I don't think they necessarily achieve more than Jewish women, for example. Or even Asian women. I don't know about here, but in England, the women from Asia--meaning Pakistan, India--they are very powerful, for instance in the field of education. And these are women who, 10-15 years ago, came from the villages as we. But now they have been educated, and their daughters are becoming very powerful in society. So people always have something to learn from each other. For example, in England, the African woman generally achieves more than the West Indian woman, and that is because the African woman who makes it to Britain in most cases is well educated. However, the woman who comes from the Carribean is usually not well educated; she comes to England to work. So you can't really say the African woman is more intelligent, because she came with a higher level of education and higher expectations to start with. The West Indian woman of my generation who came in the 60's and 70's generally have jobs as cleaners and things like that. I was able to go to a good school, and able to get a very middle-class job when I came to Britain.

On Her Own Works

- JB:** In some of your earlier books, such as the The Bride Price, The Slave Girl, and The Joys of Motherhood, although survival is a very strong theme, these works have rather sad, or negative, endings--the heroine dies, or goes from one form of slavery to another. In you most recent books, however--Double Yoke, The Rape of Shavi, and now Head Above Water--the conclusions seem to be a bit more positive, or at least ambivalent. Do you see them that way, and if so, does it reflect a change in how you personally see things?
- BE:** Regarding the last three, I always believe that given the Big E -- Education --the position of women can be very positive. In The Bride Price, the girl was not educated enough so she allowed the custom to overcome her, and she died. In The Joys of Motherhood, in those days people still believed in what tradition made of women--women must have children in order to survive and all that, and of course we know that this is no longer valid. In The Slave Girl, as I explained yesterday, the generation of my mother was more enslaved than their mothers.
- JB:** Nnu Ego, the protagonist in Joys, seems to be in the unfortunate position of being caught just in that historical time between traditional and colonial cultures.
- BE:** Yes--their time was during the war, and then their children would be [the generation of] the child in The Bride Price, and after that you have the people of Second Class Citizen who were adventurers, going forth from the old physical boundaries. Of course they suffered a little, but when they got accustomed to living in the West, then there was hope. But again, for one person who entertains such a hope, there are millions of African women who never left their homes, never left their villages; wives in the villages still remain in bondage. As for my books, they may be positive, or they may not be positive. But I believe that if you create a heroine, whether African or European, with education--not necessarily money, but education--she gains that confidence of being able to cope with the modern world. So in Head Above

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Water, I feel she [the heroine] is fairly well educated.

JB: And that she is you?

BE: Yes. [Laughs]

JB: You've spoken about the dealings you've had with publishers, and some of the difficulties you've had in writing what you want to write, and getting that out to the public. Can you tell us a little about that?

BE: Yes, for instance a book like Destination Biafra, which they removed part of because they thought it was too political, and then Joys of Motherhood, where they didn't like the title. What annoys me now is, say with Head Above Water--you said you've started reading it-- what is so bad in it that the American woman can't take? It's said that the American woman is not interested in [matters concerning] publishing, for example. Well, how do you know, she's not such a dumb person. I've been watching your television shows, and there's a lot of discussion going on about things, even on television. But they say, the American woman is not interested in reading about the way a woman is treated by the publishers. And this decision is always made by one man, George Braziller, who's 68 or something like that, and he stays in Park Avenue thinking he knows what every American woman can appreciate.

JB: One final question. What can we, as your readers, look forward to from you in the future?

BE: Well, I'm still writing about African women. In the past I've put in men's views--Double Yoke, and parts of Destination Biafra--to show that I can do that, but I feel it's no longer necessary. I'm not challenging the male writers. I have enough to write about in my own field. My backdrop may shift slightly, from real Africa to the African Diaspora. But I think I'll still be seeing everything through the eyes of women.