

Kehinde: Floundering between Two Opposite Worlds

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ÖZET Buchi Emecheta'nın romanları İngiltere'deki siyah kadınların yaşadığı çeşitli şekillerdeki dışlanmışlığın kurgusallaşmış delilleridir, çünkü Londra'da yaşayan siyah bir kadın yazar olarak Emecheta, yazılarda kendi hayatını yansıtır. Dahası, Emecheta'nın eserleri, İngiltere'deki siyah kadınların deneyimlediği çifte-sömürülmeyi yansıtır. Bir başka deyişle, bu yapı kadınları hem toplumsal, hem de özel anlamda etkiler. Hem aile, hem de toplum içinde ayrıma maruz kalırlar. Aslında, İngiltere'nin beyaz vatandaşları siyah insanların kendi toplumlarına girmesini tam olarak kabul edip, içselleştirememiştir. Sonuç olarak da, siyahlar kendilerini aşağılanmış ve dışlanmış hissediler. Özellikle de, siyah kadınlar İngiliz toplumundaki beyaz erkek ve kadınlar tarafından aşağıda görülür. Emecheta, *Kehinde* adlı romanında, çok-kültürlü bir toplumda iki-arada olan pozisyonlarından ötürü, geçiş dönemi ve anlaşmazlık içinde olan insanları anlatır. Bu insanlar ne kendi geleneksel değerlerine dönebilirler, ne de onları misafir eden toplumun modern değerlerine tam olarak uyum sağlayabilirler. Bunun sonucunda da, iki zıt alanda debelenirler.

Bu makalede, Emecheta'nın “mesafe ve katılım” metotlarının kullanımı *Kehinde* ve kocası Albert'in Londra ve Nijerya toplumlarına katılım ve yabancılaşmalarıyla değerlendirilecektir. Dahası, Emecheta'nın Igbo toplumundaki kadınların durumlarını ‘ikili sömürü’nün (aslında ‘üçlü-sömürü’ çünkü beyaz adam, beyaz kadın ve siyah adam sömürüyor) öteki tarafı olarak göstermesi, yazarın Igbo toplumunu, kadınların dışlanmasını kendi toplumlarının devamı için gerekli bir ilke olarak benimseyen ataerkil bir toplum olarak betimlemesi yoluyla incelenecektir.

ANAHTAR KELİMELER ikili-sömürü, Igbo kültürü, dışlanmışlık, Buchi Emecheta

ABSTRACT Buchi Emecheta's novels are the fictionalised proofs that show the various forms of the marginalisation of black women in England because, as a black woman writer living in London, she reflects her own life within her writing. Furthermore, her works reflect the experience of the double colonisation that black women experience in Britain. In that respect, it could be said that these women are ‘colonised’ both within the British society outside, and the Igbo culture inside their household. In other words, this structure affects women both in public and private senses: they are subject to discrimination in the family and in the society. Actually, white citizens of England have not fully accepted and internalised the entrance of the black people to their own society. As a result, black people feel humiliated and marginalised. Especially, the black women are regarded as inferior both by the white males and females in British culture. Emecheta in her novel *Kehinde* writes about the people who are in transition and in conflict because of their in-between position within a multicultural society: they either cannot return to their own traditional values, or truly join the host society's modern values. As a result, they flounder between two opposite domains.

In this article, Emecheta's usage of the methods of “distance and participation” both through *Kehinde*'s and her husband Albert's involvement and estrangement in London and Nigerian society will be evaluated. Furthermore, Emecheta's depiction of women's position in Igbo society as the other side of the ‘double colonisation’ of women (which actually means “triple colonisation” because of white men, white women and black men's exploiting black women) will be analysed through Emecheta's depiction of Igbo society as a patriarchal one which accepts the marginalisation of women as an essential principle of the continuation of their society.

KEYWORDS double colonisation, Igbo culture, marginalisation, Buchi Emecheta

“As for my survival for the past twenty years in England, from when I was a little over twenty, dragging four cold and dripping babies with me and pregnant with a fifth one- that is a miracle. And if for any reason you do not believe in miracles, please start believing, because my keeping my head above water in this indifferent society, which is probably succeeding in making me indifferent and private too, is a miracle.”¹

INTRODUCTION

Emecheta herself describes her position as a third world woman writer with these words. Buchi Emecheta is an Igbo novelist who was born in Nigeria in 1944. Her parents were working class. When she was very young, her parents died and she was educated with a scholarship at a Methodist girls’ high school. When she was seventeen years old, she married and had her first child. She came to London with her husband in 1962 where he pursued a degree and she bore four more children. She began writing at this time. Her husband, angered by her independence, burned the manuscript of her first book in a ditch. She then began studying for a degree in sociology at London University.²

Buchi Emecheta’s works are significant to evaluate African literature because as a “second generation Nigerian Igbo woman writer,”³ she represents a different kind of feminism including African concerns, and this kind of feminism is called “womanism” implying the African female struggle for “self-articulation, empowerment and womanhood.”⁴ In other words, Emecheta as an African novelist examines “African women’s issues from a gendered perspective.”⁵ In *Kehinde*, the protagonist’s transformation exemplifies this womanist empowerment in the middle of the opposing cultures.

Emecheta’s novels are the fictionalised proofs that show the various forms of the marginalisation of black women in London, because, as a black woman writer living in London, she reflects her own life within her writing. Furthermore, these works reflect the experience of the double colonisation⁶ these black women experience. In that respect, it

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1. Buchi Emecheta, *Head above Water* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994), p.5.
 2. Barbara Fister, *Third World Women’s Literatures: a Dictionary and Guide to Materials in English* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), p.96.
 3. Shalini Nadaswaran, “The Legacy of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Women’s Fiction.” *International Journal of Science and Humanity*. 2/2 (March 2012), p.146.
 4. Shalini Nadaswaran, “The Legacy of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Women’s Fiction,” p.146.
 5. Prasad Nath and Juri Dutta, “Africa and India in the novels of Dai and Emecheta,” *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 14/2 (2012), p.2.
 6. Double colonisation: “Petersen and Rutherford have used the phrase ‘a double colonisation’ to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy (John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), s.175).

could be said that these women are ‘colonised’ both within British society, outside, and Igbo culture inside their household. One of Emecheta’s aims in her novels is to depict her female protagonists’ efforts to escape victimization in their marriages within British and Igbo societies, because she thinks that only through changing the prejudices and unjust behaviours within marriage can women liberate themselves.⁷

Emecheta highlights the fact that many white British people—both male and female—are not fond of proximity to black people. As a result, they choose to ignore their attempts to join society, and the black remain invisible. As Laretta Ngcobo asserts:

“White Britons want to forget this [imperialist] past, to forget that we once lived in close proximity with them, in their kitchens, caring for their children, being raped by their men and then bearing those tainted babies. It is not surprising that our appearance in the front garden of Britain causes embarrassment. We bring back to life forgotten crimes and immense guilt. This amnesia is the acknowledged admission that British society still has not come to terms with our presence. We linger in a kind of social limbo and consequently suffer a state of invisibility.”⁸

Actually, the white citizens of Britain have not fully accepted and internalised the entrance of the black people to their society. As a result, black people feel humiliated and marginalised. Especially, black women are regarded as inferior both by white males and females in Britain.

In her novel *Kehinde*, Emecheta depicts Igbo society as a patriarchal one that accepts the marginalisation of women as an essential principle of the continuation of their society:

“According to Emecheta, Igbo society embodies the principle of male dominance and female subordination. Emecheta’s women for the most part are sacrificed at the altar of a male oriented society, and men exploit the sex/gender system to maintain male-dominance.”⁹

Even *Kehinde*’s husband Albert chooses to behave according to the patriarchal codes of Igbo culture, that is, he accepts polygamy as a typical way of living: “I know you’re angry. But look back, *Kehinde*. My father had two wives, yours had three, so what sin did I commit that is so abominable?”¹⁰ In spite of his long years within a modern London, he thinks that as a Nigerian man he has the right to have a younger wife.

7. Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (University of Michigan Press, 2007), p.98.

8. Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, p.116.

9. Marie Umeh (ed.), “Igbo Women and Culture,” in *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1996), p.xxiv.

10. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde* (Oxford: Heinemann Publishers, 1994), p.86.

If we are to examine the position of African women in Igbo society as mothers, daughters and wives, it will be crucial to accept the fact that

“sociocultural attitudes toward women globally are largely negative; positing that woman is basically inferior to man...The position of Igbo woman in her society is just as complex. However, Buchi Emecheta in her oeuvre argues that Igbo society, like most patriarchal societies, limits a woman’s scope and talent by restricting her to male dominance and domestic spaces.”¹¹

Umeh argues that Igbo traditions regard women as ‘other’ because men in the society are accepted as superior by birth, whereas women could gain this privilege only by sacrificing themselves to their families by becoming wives or mothers. Buchi Emecheta, by giving voice to these suppressed women in Igbo culture, tries to depict ‘the double standard’ existing in her culture.

Buchi Emecheta’s *Kehinde* is about Albert and Kehinde Okolo’s arrival in London in the 1960s (during a period in which finding work was easier for emigrants). Kehinde attains a position in a bank, and she begins to earn more money than her husband Albert. It seems that in their marriage Kehinde has more liberties compared to her Igbo sisters: she feels that she and her husband have the same rights in their household affairs. In spite of Kehinde’s being fond of her status as a woman in England, Albert has an inner desire to return to Nigeria to regain his empowered position as a man in Nigeria, and as a man who is in-between two different cultures, he wants to enjoy his own masculine privileges in his native country. Therefore, after eighteen years of living in London, he decides to return to Nigeria. Then, Kehinde becomes pregnant which is regarded as a handicap by Albert (preventing their journey). Although abortion is against Igbo customs, Albert insists on it because he sees this baby as a hindrance to his plans. Kehinde feels depressed after the abortion and, in a mystical way, her dead twin Taiwo’s soul (inside her) warns her about the future. After this abortion, Albert goes to Nigeria, and Kehinde does not receive any news from him. She then decides to join her family in Nigeria and learns that Albert has married a young woman called Rike, and that she is pregnant. After Rike’s giving birth to a son and, sensing Albert’s being detached and aloof to her, Kehinde decides to return to London. She finds her own identity by having her own house, having a new relation with a man and getting a new job there. This is her story of liberation.

In the first part of the novel, the seemingly comfortable life of the married couple Kehinde and Albert, and their children Bimpe and Joshua is seen. However, the tension

11. Marie Umeh (ed.), *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, p.1.

risers within the family after they get a letter from Albert's sisters in Nigeria, and Albert's thinking about going back to Nigeria because of the "Oil Boom" there. The question is: is it Nigeria who is in need of Albert or vice versa?

While Kehinde and Albert are arguing, the theme of the cultural dilemma emerges. Their son Joshua says: "'Whenever they speak their language, it means they don't want us around.' ... Kehinde laughed and ventured, 'Whose fault is it that you don't speak your mother tongue when you refuse to learn?' 'You mean your mother tongue. Mine is English...'"¹² It is seen, then, that even within the family, there is a cultural gap: the second generation has become fully westernised. As a result of the multi-cultural effects within English society, they become hybrids.

The narrator reveals the real reason of Albert's desire to return to Nigeria firstly by depicting his position within his family in London. Albert says: "'We own a house' ... He was unaware of the legal status of a wife here in Britain. In Nigeria the home belonged to the man, even if the woman spent her entire life keeping it in order."¹³ Actually, Albert uses the word 'we' because he knows that Kehinde is earning more than him. In reality he is not fond of the possibility of equality, even within the marriage, and "He wanted to go home and show off his new life style, his material success."¹⁴ It is interesting that Kehinde replies to Albert using 'your house', pretending to be the good Nigerian housewife — while Albert does not tell his real desires to his wife.

Emecheta in this novel writes about people who are in transition and in conflict because of their in-between position within a multicultural society: they either cannot return to their own traditional values, or truly join the host society's modern values. As a result, they flounder between two opposite domains. In particular, Albert and Kehinde are in-between their Igbo traditions and Western values. Albert finds a solution to this cultural conflict by returning to his homeland to regain his manly power; on the other hand, Kehinde knows that as a woman she has more opportunities in England. As a result, the conflict (which is the main theme of the novel) continues within their marriage through their opposite views and behaviours.

In addition to their different point of views, the news that Kehinde would be pregnant also shocks them and separates their ideas about their life further. At work, Albert tells the news and his decision to his friend: "I know abortion is wrong but we are in a strange land, where you do contrary things to your culture."¹⁵ Actually, abortion is against Igbo

12. Buchi Emecheta. *Kehinde*, p.3.

13. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.4.

14. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.6.

15. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.15.

customs but Albert behaves in a contradictory action; on the one hand, he wants to return to his traditional way of life, on the other hand when it is advantageous for him, he uses the modern aspects of London life such as spending his wife's money or telling his wife to abort the child.

Because of the negative mood following the abortion, Kehinde feels depressed and she feels lonely. She therefore feels valueless, and, as if only she is responsible for that burden, Albert is not interested in her feelings and ideas about having the baby or not. He alone makes the decision. As a result, she becomes alienated even from her own body. Meanwhile, an unknown, mystic power inside her urges her to do the opposite: not to have the abortion: "Our mother died having you. I too died so you could live. Are you now going to kill your child before he has a chance of life?"¹⁶

This mystic power is Kehinde's twin sister, Taiwo, but both Taiwo and their mother died while giving birth to Kehinde, and Kehinde is regarded as a sign of bad luck. According to Donatus Nwoga, in *Kehinde*, Taiwo is used as her child.¹⁷ In this respect, it could be said that with the presence of her dead twin Taiwo inside her, Kehinde feels powerful and throughout the novel, she will demonstrate the necessary courage for not obeying all the rules of patriarchal society: both in London and Nigeria. Furthermore, when her inner psychology is concerned, Kehinde is more faithful to Igbo traditions. And after the abortion, she tries to remain calm and strong.

After the abortion, it seems that while Kehinde seems to cleave her own desires, which lead her to stay in London, Albert is in an ambivalent position through which he experiences "attraction and repulsion" to both English and Nigerian cultures. Albert complains about this multicultural edge of the society: "But I want to go back to the way of my life my father had, a life of comparative ease for men, where men were men and women were women, and one was respected as somebody. Here, I am nobody, just a storekeeper. I'm fed up with just listening to my wife and indulging her... No, to be at home is better."¹⁸ He feels alienated from western values and displaced in a place where he feels he does not belong. Still, he pretends to behave as if he were "westernised."

Whereas Kehinde feels as if she belongs to London, she does not problematize the multicultural traits of the country: "Here, she was full of herself, playing the role of a

16. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.17.

17. It is conceptualized among the western Igbo to refer to not only an individual's personal god but also to the person who has reincarnated the individual (Berrian, Brenda F., "Her Ancestor's Voice: The Ibeji Transcendence of Duality in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*," p.171).

18. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.35.

white, middle-class woman, forgetting she was not only black, but an Igbo woman, just because she worked in a bank and earned more than he did.”¹⁹ This difference between their perspectives lies in the fact that they feel at home wherever they feel powerful. As in the case of Kehinde, she feels occupying a visible space in London; on the contrary Albert knows that he could feel himself powerful only in his own country, as a patriarch who is superior to the inferior indigenous people in Nigeria because of his western education and money. As a result, when she returns to London, Kehinde feels relieved: “... though it was cold, the sun was shining, and she felt a surge of elation. Only a few hours before, still in Nigeria, she had thought the whole world was collapsing. Now she notices that the trees the council had planted along the street were just beginning to bud. In a few days, they would burst into bloom, and it would be spring.”²⁰

Because of this ambivalent position of the husband and wife in their marriage, both Kehinde and Albert experience a kind of identity conflict from a particularly national dimension. As Bernd Schulte asserts:

“‘Intercultural writing’ [deals with] ... the problems of finding ‘national identities’ somewhere between tradition and modernity... Orientation and identity formation seem to be staged within processes of intercultural oscillation... [These writers] conceptualize their protagonists by fictionalising such processes within the framework of distance and participation.”²¹

Likewise, in *Kehinde*, Emecheta also uses this method of distance and participation both by Kehinde’s and Albert’s involvement and estrangement in London and Nigerian societies.

After Albert’s departure Kehinde finds tenants for her house, and she continues to perform her motherly duties and her job, but her sense of loneliness captures her. Moreover, Albert’s letters are lacking in sensitivity, and when she approaches the edge of madness, her twin again forces her to do something: “why don’t you go to Nigeria and find out what is happening, before it’s too late? Have you forgotten that in Nigeria it’s considered manly for men to be unfaithful? Even if he didn’t want women they would come to him.”²² Also, as a lonely figure, she feels depressed because of society’s labelling of her as a bad woman for renting one of the rooms in her house to a young man. She does not understand the reactions of the society.

19. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.35.

20. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.107.

21. John C. Hawley, “Coming to Terms: Buchi Emecheta’s *Kehinde and the Birth of a Nation*,” in Marie Umeh (ed.), *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1996), p.335.

22. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.46.

After two years of loneliness, when Kehinde goes to Nigeria, she sees the changes in Albert and she "... slip[s] effortlessly back into her old submissive role. Besides, there [i]s something about Albert's new confidence which excited admiration, make[s] him more attractive."²³ In the house, she experiences many shocks: she learns that they will be with all of their family; she and Albert will have separate bedrooms and "the beautiful, sophisticated, young, pregnant woman, with a baby."²⁴ In Nigeria, they are on the edge of losing their intimacy and, as a result, they stop sharing anything as husband and wife.

She then continues to describe her rival Rike with what she has, and what she lacks: "Yes, ... he has another wife. She is a lecturer. She had a Ph.D... She has a son twelve months old... Honestly, ... Albert has humiliated me... It's a man's world here."²⁵ This letter both signifies Kehinde's humiliation as a result of her neglected position within polygamy, and as an educated woman- Rike's not resisting the polygamy. With her decision to return to England, Kehinde proves that she cannot tolerate an indifferent husband whom she should share with the whole household full of women although she is less educated and older than Rike. Rike, on the other hand, as a result of her acceptance of polygamy, experiences Albert's deceiving her with a younger woman from another place. Emecheta therefore indirectly criticises women who are against women.

The question is "Why could not Kehinde find her identity in her own culture as Albert does?" Actually, Kehinde's marginalisation in both cultures (a valueless Negro within white culture and a modernised black woman within the Igbo culture) creates her ambivalence. However, throughout the novel, as an emigrant, Emecheta achieves to analyse both sides of the coin: "... from the perspective of England she sees problems for women within patriarchal Nigerian culture but from the perspective of her homeland she sees the problems for blacks within British culture."²⁶ As a result, like Albert, she could not choose the simple way of returning to her old exploitation within her own society, instead within her liberalised new identity she merges the conflicting values.

When she returns to London, she claims her independent identity as a woman by declaring that the house they owned is hers. However, she experiences the economic transformation of the country, and she begins working as a hotel cleaner. Still, she is happy within her new life, because she is free and this is her life. If the main question is how African women could stand on their own feet to liberate themselves; Emecheta's

23. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.66.

24. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.66; Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.93.

25. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.94.

26. Christine W. Sizemore, "The London Novels of Buchi Emecheta," in Marie Umeh (ed.), *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1996), p.368.

solution for Kehinde (on the way of liberation) is within her family by ignoring her son's patriarchal claims in her own house in a separate place from her husband towards the end of the novel.

After her son's seeing her with Mr. Gibson, she finally cuts all the restricting patriarchal ties from herself and becomes a unique identity: "Claiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human'... 'Now we are one', the living Kehinde said to the spirit of her long dead Taiwo."²⁷

As Helen Tiffin argues, postcolonial writers overcome their identity conflicts by returning to their own cultural traits. Likewise, Kehinde solves her identity crisis (resulted from the conflict between Western and Nigerian cultures) by turning to the mysticism of Igbo culture: the dead twin of Kehinde which serves as the superego of her through which she can communicate with her own soul serves as a symbol helping Kehinde to find her true identity.²⁸

In the end, Kehinde fulfils the gaps in her identity by compromising the two opposite cultures within a new one. She achieves this by turning to her own mysterious roots inside her which is the power gained through the existence of her mysterious dead twin Taiwo. She is also liberated by becoming independent and powerful even within the British society that ignores her. This is Emecheta's solution to the existing problems of black women in England and in Africa.

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27. Buchi Emecheta, *Kehinde*, p.141.

28. John J. Hawley, "Coming to Terms: Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde and the Birth of a Nation*," p.334.

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