

Decoding Female Resistance in Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*

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In order to understand and explore the subject of the subordination of women, it is pertinent that one examine the dynamics of power that govern the relationship between men and women. Kate Millet calls it “sexual politics”, her definition of politics being that of a “power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another”(2000:23). Sexual politics is played out in the life of a woman at every phase of her life and it is played out more specifically on her body. Women are attributed all the qualities men considered second-rate or sub-standard. In Sigmund Freud's view passivity, masochism and narcissism are three of the most distinguishing traits of women. Women are considered to be unstable and shallow, unable to take decisions on their own. Women are expected to submit to men because men are considered to have superior intellect and better sense. The body of a woman is considered as a procreating device and a source of sexual pleasure. Here it would be significant to mention Simone de Beauvoir's argument regarding the body, she writes that man “thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world, which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it”(1997:15). This suggest that man takes immense pride in his body while considering the body of a woman as a burden she has to live with. Man being the measure of all things, women's body is perceived as a lack that can hope for perfection or completion only in its relation to men. Ketu Katrak reiterates this alienation from their own body saying that women, “experience self-exile, a sense of not belonging to themselves.” (2006:158). Female resistance to this lack of self-determination over their own bodies form an important aspect of the African feminist struggle. This paper attempts to examine the subtle ways in which women undertake acts of subversion and resistance.; discreetly disrupting the status quo and shifting the balance of power in their favour. To borrow from Foucault analysis of power, women are not just “points of application” but “vehicles of power”(1980:98). In the context of this debate, power here is not a negative or an oppressive force, but it is a positive force that give rise to forms of resistance.

Buchi Emecheta can be considered as one of the most prolific and dexterous women writers of Africa. Her works are regarded as a pragmatic representation of the consequences of an oppressive patriarchal culture on the African women's existence. This paper attempts to examines Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*(1994), as an account of female resistance to disempowerment. It analyses how the protagonist of this novel, Kehinde navigate her life within the patriarchally sanctioned space while covertly resisting it. The modern African women experience social issues fraught with contradictions. Their dilemma is that of how to reconcile the modern self while trying to stay true to their traditional roots. Ato Quayson's arguments reflects this conundrum. He writes, “women's existence is strung between traditionalism and modernity in ways that make it extremely difficult for them to attain personal freedom without severe sacrifices or compromise”(2007:585). Kehinde, finds herself caught in a delicate balancing act between showing respect for tradition while trying to forge an identity of their own.

Kehinde, the protagonist of the novel with the same name is an educated Nigerian woman settled with her family in London. The London home represents a space where Kehinde could make her voice heard and Albert treats Kehinde as a friend and a

companion. But she's well aware that in doing this he was just being practical and diplomatic, she earned more than he does and the mortgage on the house was taken in her name. Even in London, thousand miles away from home, Kehinde could feel the traditional Patriarchal force looming over her life in the form of letters from Albert sisters urging him to come home. In fact, this is further substantiated by Albert's desire to give up life in London and move back to Nigeria. The concept of home is very different for Kehinde and Albert. Kehinde dreams about home are confused, she knows that back in Nigeria, in her husband's family she would be regarded as a non-person. She says, "I haven't a clear vision what I am suppose to be looking for there"(22). Albert on the other hand longs for the Nigeria where he could assert his maleness and privilege as the man of the house. Albert conversation with his colleague Prabhu exposes his real reason for wanting to go home "But I want to go back to the way of life my father had, a life of comparative ease for men, where men were men and women were women.."(35). Kehinde on the other hand was aware that

"behind the veneer of westernisation, the traditional Igbo man was alive and strong, awaiting an opportunity to reclaim his birthright"(35)

Kehinde, in spite of being in London away from home and earning more than her husband feels threatened by patriarchal discourses which continually disempowered her.

When Albert's plans are disrupted by Kehinde's pregnancy, Albert forces her to abort the baby even though abortion is unthinkable in Nigeria. The body of the women becomes the sites where power politics is played out. "...convenient vehicles which, when they took on an inconvenient burden, could be emptied of it by the same means"(17). This affirms how Albert wanted the power and privilege that would be his at home in Nigeria but he doesn't think twice about rejection a part of his culture when it inconvenience him. He justifies himself saying, "I know abortion is wrong but we are in a strange land, where you do things contrary to your culture"(15). This confirm how tradition often tilt the balance of power in the favour of men perpetuating "women's subordinate status while ensuring male privilege" (2006:8). The abortion was very painful, but Kehinde had to let Albert have his way so that his dream of going home would not be jeopardised. But she was not ready to play the victim, she decided to have her tubes tied in spite of Albert's protest. She claimed control over her body by doing that. The abortion changes the dynamics of their relationship forever. The body which underwent a distortion was hers, Kehinde realises that he could never felt what she had felt. On their journey home she looked at him and realises "He had nothing to offer her"(33).

Kehinde's eagerness to please Albert only reiterates how she is continually obliged to seek his approval since he is the man in the house. Here it would be significant to mention Foucault concept of the Panoptican surveillance which is relevant in the study of how women sense of self and her worldview is determined by patriarchy. Sandra Lee Bartky in her essay Foucault, Femininity and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power enunciates this point, she writes,

In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical maleconnoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement" (1998:34).

Her treatment of Mary Elikwu also reveal how her attitude is determined by the society were a single woman is treated as an outsider and something of a fluke, a curiosity and a challenge (38). Kehinde's sense of worth and identity comes from being Albert's wife and unwittingly she conforms to the idea that a woman without a husband

is incomplete no matter how successful she may be. In spite of having been through an excruciating experience, Kehinde went all out to give Albert a great farewell party, but Albert failed to appreciate her effort. He was too engrossed in having his needs fulfilled.

Back in Nigeria, her sister's support prevented Kehinde from losing her mind when she heard the news about Albert's betrayal. Ifewinya has learnt the tools of surviving in an increasingly oppressive patriarchal culture. Her pretence of being a simple-minded older woman was a mask she had worn for eighteen years (112). She helps Kehinde by imploring her to exercise restraint so that Kehinde would not make a complete fool of herself. Even when Kehinde decides to leave with generous help from Mariammo, Ifewinya was the only person to accompany her to the airport. As tradition dictates, she considers it her duty as an elder sister to ask Kehinde not to go. But once Ifewinya realises that Kehinde would not change her mind, she encourages her to take the step even suggesting that Kehinde takes another man. Kehinde was surprised to see this side of her sister's persona, "Kehinde glimpsed the spirit trapped behind the veneer of tradition" (106). Ifewinya also avenges her sister in her unassuming ways. In the course of a conversation, she reminds Rike of the London home Albert shares with Kehinde and insinuates that Albert has a new girlfriend. Sisterhood can be considered as another form of covert female resistance. Brenda Berrian commenting on this aspect writes, "with gratefulness, Kehinde counts her riches because she has her biological sister, her spirit twin and an adopted sister who all provide her with support and understanding" (1996:175). The friendship and loyalty of these women gave Kehinde the strength to fight back and to forge her own destiny. In the course of the novel, we learn that as a young girl, Kehinde was quite tenacious when it comes to holding on to her identity. Though her aunt tried to protect her from herself, keeping from Kehinde the story of her birth, Kehinde knew she was born one set of twins. After Albert left for Nigeria, Kehinde alone in London was increasingly realising that she would have to look within for strength, the inner voice which she attributes to her twin sister Taiwo.

Back in London, the first thing Kehinde did was to lay claim on the London house, wrenching the for sale sign from the ground, defiantly exclaiming "This house is mine" (108). The London home symbolises assertion of her identity. Kehinde decides to quit being the victim and instead take charge as the victor. She even got herself a university degree while supplementing her income working at a hotel. It was at the hotel that Kehinde encounters another debilitating patriarchal and colonial oppression. A sheikh, whose wife Kehinde has been tutoring demanded to see what a black woman looked like. This echoes an argument raised by Bell Hooks in *Ain't I A Woman* where she talks about the devaluation of the black women's worth perpetuated by stereotypes regarding her sexuality (1983). Kehinde as a black woman had to fight not only patriarchal constraints but also racism. She refused to be cowed down, even though she runs the risks of losing her job. She walked out of that incapacitating situation telling herself that, "The sheikh might want to see what a black woman's body looked like, but that body was not going to be hers" (132).

Taking a cue from Albert who doesn't think twice about taking another woman, Kehinde went on to have a physical relationship with her tenant Mr. Gibson. She makes the best use of what has been offered her, making use of the situation she finds herself in, to her advantage. She tells Joshua, her son, "I'm still his wife, if I want to be, and I'm still your mother. It doesn't change anything." (138). This was something very new for Joshua who was brought up to consider mothers as all sacrificing and submissive. Goaded by his father, Joshua even went to the court trying to get his mother to transfer the house in his name. This is again symbolic of the male oriented patriarchy trying to

coerce Kehinde into submission. Brenda Berrian aptly remarks, “Now, Albert (indirectly) and their son (directly) are jolted awake when they confront a wife/mother who lays claim to her property and rights on her turf”(178). Kehinde also made it a point to reconnect with women like Mary Elikwu. She began to understand and appreciate a woman daring to take a stand, leaving her violent husband and bringing up her children by herself.

Women like Kehinde, Mary Elikwu and Ifewinya found a way to deal with the patriarchal constraints and use it to their advantage. Power has shifted from the hands of patriarchy into the hands of these women through subversive acts. Ketu Katrak commenting on this paradigm shift writes, “Female covert resistances are undertaken with self consciousness and remarkable creativity that decides to take risks and confront domination selectively and strategically in the interest of self preservation”(2006:3) Kehinde bargained for her right to assert her identity. Redefining tradition, Kehinde disarm it through her covert acts of resistance, triumphing over it at the end.

Buchi Emecheta is not afraid of articulating her denunciation of the ill effects of patriarchy in her works. She manages to sustain the interest of the reader through her use of simple, everyday words, verisimilitude in her characterization and humour in her description of occurrences in the novel She strongly advocates giving women more choices in life so that they may develop their potentials and contribute more to the society. In Kehinde, Emecheta has created the new African woman who embraces modern values while at the same time being aware of her roots.

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