



Transnationalism in Diasporic Context: African Woman in *Gwendolen* by Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract

The change in identity of a diasporic African girl due to sexual trauma that she undergoes in her ‘ModerKontry’ from paternal figures and later due to racial discrimination in the adopted nation is detailed in the fiction under study. The plot of the work conceptualizes a number of multiple identities in characterization, which are subject to constant renegotiations in the transcultural scenario. *Gwendolen*, as a novel, depicts how the Black woman’s survival depends on her ability to use all economic, social and cultural resources available to her. The sexual laceration and racial ambivalence that the protagonist undergoes, as a transnational First World immigrant, is delineated by Buchi Emecheta in this work poignantly.

Keywords

identity, discrimination, ambivalence, diaspora, sexual assault

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A picture of the migrant world torn with postcolonial psychosis caused by alienation and dislocation is depicted in Emecheta's novel *Gwendolen*. Yet this work based on the diasporic experiences of the African female also shows such a world to be mitigated by the hybridity evinced by these communities. In fact, *Gwendolen* is a microcosm of any diasporic transnational community. The liberation of the woman of colour of the Third World from the multiple oppressional forces of race, class and gender is the ultimate picture drawn by Emecheta in the novels of the last phase. The black women's lived experiences depict the validity of the contribution of the past, present and future in their resistance against gender and race constructs.

The novel depicts is the heart-rending tale of a young West Indian girl who goes to England, and deals with the gradual transformation of an African female – her transformation into a fully developed woman, possessed of unique identity. Unlike Emecheta's Nigerian novels, this work is the saga of a black West Indian girl from the native land of Jamaica, replanted to England, the 'ModerKontry'. A product of the colonial hangover, she is named 'Gwendolen' by her parents but she is known by the nickname June-June. Her early life away from her parents witnesses her deflowering, by her grandmother's sickly lover guised as her protector. She escapes to her parents in England only to realize that her father fails to recognize her as his own flesh and blood and abuses her sexually. The most hateful crime of child abuse and incest is committed by the father figure in the novel, the ravishing of own progeny/ward.

The novel deals with an African identity of a new variety, the West Indian pidgin race, and is set in 1960s. The plot moves on with elements of transculturalism – with emigration to England, the First World, in the 1970s and the racial situation prevalent at the time.

One interesting feature of the work is the names of the West Indian characters – they are all English Christian names, a proof of the influence of westernization of the land. The incomprehension as well as the blind imitation by the natives of the Western culture is suggested in the initial statement of the novel: "She was christened Gwendolen. But her Mammy could not pronounce it, neither could her Daddy or his people" (1). The opening chapter describes her 'Daddy' going to England (for which he gets married to her Mammy for official purposes), at which everyone is extremely excited: "She had no idea where or what England was. But she sensed that her Daddy's people who lived down in Kingston, and who were so incredibly sophisticated – because they all wore white gloves- -thought it a good place" (9). The veneration of the Carribean for their 'ModerKontry' is

another instance of the colonial umbilical cord still being uncut. Gwendolen's Daddy's people in Kingston, ridiculed as Yellow Niggers by them, considered themselves superior to the pure blacks of Granville; this is another cultural fiasco in the colonial countries.

All the young girls in the colony like Gwen and her friends Shivorn and Cocoa dreamed of being a First World citizen, of mingling their destiny with the moderkontry where "anybody could be anything" (44): "She dreamed that one day she would go to England or to America like Shivorn's aunt, Monica. When they played, Shivorn, Cocoa and herself, they all talked of going overseas" (95). The 'next generation' clearly wished to leave their cultural baggage of mixed mongrels in West Indies and acquire a new status of the wealthy sophisticated Western elite. Gwendolen realizes her dream albeit a bit late in the day, when her parents sent for her to England.

The picture of blacks in England that Emecheta paints in *Gwendolen* is one of cultural amalgamation and interracial exchanges. Emecheta's Nigerian nativity is seen in a number of significant characters in the novel, the closest friends of Sonia and Winston (Gwendolen's mother and father) - Gladys Odowis and Mr. Illochina, as well as their landlord Mr. Aliyu are Nigerians. But the continental divide between these Africans who could not identify or completely appreciate each other's values is suggested in the novel:

Mr. Aliyu had given up the task of teaching Sonia how to pronounce his name properly. Being a Nigerian with a deep family meaning to his name, he used to be annoyed when his name was badly pronounced, thereby rendering it meaningless. He could appreciate when white people would not bother to make the attempt, but when it came to black people like himself, the pill became very, very, bitter indeed. But by now he had learned to regard it as one of the dehumanizing processes of existence you have to go through in a country that is not your own. (57)

This led to a lukewarm relationship between the householder and tenant: Mr Aliyu did not bother about the Brilliantons who spoke Pidgin English and the Brilliantons considered Mr Aliyu, the West African, as the 'uncivilized African man'. Colonial encounter had made a deep breach between men of the same breed such as the West Indian and West African blacks.

Relations became strained between householder and tenant when Mr. Aliyu misinformed the Brilliantons that Granny Naomi was 'very sick' (as per Nigerian custom) instead of telling them that she is dead, thereby sending Sonia home, something she could ill afford. The lack of communication between Africans, says Emecheta, was like the

confusion at the Tower of Babel: “the gulf which was made by slavery that separated brother from brother was still too wide and too deep to be crossed by a single narrow bridge made of the English language” (120). The pidgin and creole identity of the West Indian and migrant Africans reveals the part played by language in the assimilation of culture. The dislocation felt by these people in spite of their acculturation becomes part of the language whereby they represent themselves.

England is depicted by Emecheta throughout the novel as a dull and cold place. England was the sophisticated place “where everybody mind dem business” (162), and people hardly recognized each other. Gwen, the friendly Caribbean girl, finds herself snubbed and in an alien land, when the English returned greetings with a formal and distant “kind of smile that stretched the corners of the mouth but the eyes remained cold like those of a fish” (69). “Gwendolen from the Carribean is clearly socialized as the Other; her problems with British English are interpreted as stupidity, which triggers her resistance and truancy at school. Instead of promoting assimilation, her English school generates alienation” (Meyer 338).

Sonia’s reluctance to return to England after her idyllic interlude in Jamaica is echoed in her thoughts: “Well maybe she must go back. Back to London with its rain. London with its gray skies. London with its green trees and concrete pavements. London where she could make money looking after other people’s children...” (139). As a black woman of the lower economic category, Sonia’s life was a bitter pill to swallow in London. As a black worker in the First World, her life of drudgery is in keeping with the life prescribed for women by patriarchy.

Yet the role of an ordinary African woman within her family is also given in *Gwendolen*:

She knew that good women were not supposed to live and exist for themselves. They were expected to remain alive for others. They were created to look after members of their families, to boost their ego of the man in their lives, be the man a father, a husband, or even a son. And they were to nurture and act as agony aunts to their offspring. But to live for themselves was not to be. (135)

Such is the conditioning effect of the traditional societies that the woman is not an individual in herself, but a mere appendage –if married she is supposed to be completely submissive to her husband, even if he is far from the ideal one would expect of manhood. The woes of an African woman who has to suffer physical assault from her husband are

given in the character of the Nigerian, Gladys Odowis. The lack of support from the family and society that women receive is given in her own words:

Well, his people won't see all that beating and harassment. They'll say he's your husband, stay with him. And in your culture, it's bad to talk about the beatings you receive from your husband outside the family.

Many people think a wife who is beaten deserves to be beaten. (65)

Later on we are told of Mrs. Odowis learning of her husband's second marriage from a Nigerian newspaper. That men were by nature polygamous is an old African belief, and the male of the species consider it their prerogative even in the modern times. Even Mr Illochina, Winston Brillianton's friend, is introduced as the helpless husband of two wives, each intent on competing with the other in producing his offspring.

The darker side of the libidinous nature of men is depicted in the figures of Uncle Johnny and Winston Brillianton. Like Mr. Odowis and Illochina, Uncle Johnny and Winston too are betrayers. While Odowis and Illochina get off the hook of public condemnation because of entrenched patriarchal bias, Uncle Johny and Winston Brillianton present a blacker picture since they committed crimes and broke taboos which ostracized them from the society.

Gwendolen is a study in sexual abuse, related as the story of a child developing into adolescence. She was sexually misused when she was hardly eight by Uncle Johnny, Granny's boyfriend, by daily indoctrination that it was her way of showing him she loved him' (25). Later, as an adolescent, she was abused by her own father, who told her that 'if she loved him she would not deny him the little favour' (144). The bewildered child losing her innocence when one of the most trusted grown-ups exploits her is poignantly rendered in the novel. The sad plight of the girl makes it a story of betrayal by the protector himself. The frequent misuse engenders guilt feeling in her as a child, only to be multiplied by the threat that Johnny would expose their secret. The bedwetting of the grown up girl is the natural and extremely possible outcome of the psychological trauma she undergoes. Confusion is engendered in her at this double exploitation and janus-face of the male protectors in her life:

She gave in to her father because she did not wish to cause trouble for anybody. And if she could bear it with that stupid Uncle Johnny who forced himself on her, what of the Daddy she loved? It was a lot to give, but then could your own father hurt you? ... All ... formed a big lump of

hatred against her father, against all men. ... What game was her Daddy playing? The same game as Uncle Johnny played?" (191)

"Incest manifests itself as the internalization of the despicable: a tragic inward turn through which the black man misuses his paltry power, expresses his rage by preying on his weak daughter, violates boundaries and betrays her trust" (Ogunyemi 264). The incest with the daughter is the betrayal of the mother too, a fact that Sonia was reluctant to understand. But once she does, she too is furious at her husband. The final figurative stabbing of Winston Brillianton is Emecheta getting back at men-folk.

Nemesis stalks Winston Brillianton according to typical African belief. That he who committed a sin against Earth would perish by the forces of earth itself, like fire or water, was the native African belief. He dies in a gas explosion, though one wittingly induced by himself. "Winston Brillianton died, possibly suicidally in a fire which mirrors his own spent life of provincialism, racial subjugation and incest" (Yongue 88).

Despite psychological shackles, Sonia rallies around Gwen, once she learns that her daughter is insane with grief and decides to have it 'out' with Winston. Finally she closes the door of her life to all memories of Winston, once she realizes the parentage of her granddaughter.

Insanity is an escape mechanism both mother and daughter resort to when life becomes too incomprehensible and exploitative for them. The shock and sorrow of her mother's death are the superficial cause of Sonia's misery. But on careful analysis one could see the uneasiness surfacing in her mind even before she leaves England. Once back in Jamaica, the premonition that she would not find matters as they stand on her return to England, coupled with the startling reality of the death news makes Sonia question Winston and Mr. Aliyu playing tricks upon her, and she loses her mental equilibrium. She recovers with the sympathetic care and attention of the village women friends. Similarly Gwendolen gets help from a number of African sisterhood when she is in the mental sanatorium. She becomes crazy with grief due to the strained atmosphere of the silent betrayer (her father), accusing mother and prodding social workers. The trauma and agony she suffers is of an excruciating degree – that of double betrayal wherein she loses her long sought for family-her father who exploits her and a mother who condemns her. It is only the image of her unborn baby that helps her tide over the period of insane hysteria.

The love of Gwen for her child surfaces in her naming her child 'Iyamide', "my mother is here", an African name: "it means everything I ever wanted, warmth, security, comfort is all here in a female form. That is going to be her Christian name. But it is a name

with a meaning and you see you can pronounce it” (237). Thus Gwendolen announces her liberation from the colonial and psychological shackles that have long since fettered the African woman. Rejecting a ‘grand’ Christian (Western) unpronounceable name like her own and choosing a return to the roots with a sensible African name glorifying their culture venerating women, Gwendolen rises like a phoenix over the ashes of her undesirable past.

Gwendolen by Buchi Emecheta stands out as a symbolic presentation of the African woman finding herself. The eponymous heroine of the novel is a representation of thousands of African women who would like to declare their independence of invading cultures. Gwendolen, christened so by illiterate West Indian parents, realizes what her name is only upon reaching England, the ‘ModerKontry’. The cultural displacement of the African coming into contact with the English, liberating herself in the process is recorded into the novel when Gwen loses her way home in the first snow of her life (77). Finally she acquires her freedom and an independent outlook on life, which allows her to decide that ‘I want the child’, (181) despite the obvious difficulties waiting for a single mother.

A constant underlying theme in all Emecheta’s works is the significance of education as a liberating force in one’s life. Even in Granville, as soon as Sonia plans to leave for England, she arranges Gwendolen’s education. Financial difficulties soon put an end to it, leading to Gwendolen being very backward in her class in England. The sessions in the remedial classes along with a lot of stupid children made her feel herself a failure. The living conditions in Granville and London, where she had no time to improve her studies, cause her downfall. Even the relationship between Sonia and Winston degenerates, as Emecheta points out, due to the lack of education. Unable to read or write letters, Winston sends her away to Jamaica, believing Mr. Aliyu’s words since he had read the message for them. Upon reaching Jamaica, Sonia is cut off from Winston due to their inability to write to each other. The separation of two years, during which Gwendolen dropped out of school to play housewife, makes her pregnant with her father’s child. It is the entry of Emmanuel, the Greek boy, into the scene as her boyfriend that changes Gwendolen’s horizons. His obvious learning (albeit from old Sun newspapers) impresses her and she decides to learn from him. At the end of the novel, as Gwendolen emerges as a new woman, she proudly announces that she has “read a whole book written by a black woman, and I will read a lot more” (212). As Emmanuel observes, motherhood seems to make her wiser since with the arrival of the child she

begins to read books from cover to cover and to feel like a new person. She thanks Emmanuel for it:

I'm so glad I can now read. I am like that person that was blind who became suddenly sighted when Jesus touched his eyes. I can now share the thoughts of other men and women who lived outside Granville. You now make me see. (213)

Education is the eye-opener, the miracle drug that provides vision to the blind and the ignorant. It is also symptomatic of the change in the racial attitude of the people. The New Generation of people (viz, Gwendolen and her classmates) unbaptised to memories of slavery herald a new earth and a new heaven in racial matters.

As the curtain falls, one looks at the picture of the interracial unit of the Greek Emmanuel, West Indian Gwendolen and Iyamide of pure African image named so to represent the unique culture. As Lisa H Iyer points out:

Gwendolen is by no means guaranteed a rosy future. Yet she has at a relatively young age discarded some of the cultural, racial and sexual baggage which still weighs her mother down, and seems positioned to build a conscious self unhampered by oppressive cultural and sexual norms of Jamaica or England. (133)

Gwendolen, despite being a tale of incest, has a visionary womanist ending from Emecheta's pen. Winston the criminal in *Gwendolen* dies according to the African belief viz that a man who has sinned against nature should die by natural forces. His death by gas explosion propels him into a drum where he is symbolically baptized by tar. Emecheta records men like Winston as trash, by closing the novel with Sonia kniving a waste bin calling it Winston Brillianton. Emmanuel, Gwen's boyfriend turns out to be a messianic figure (a carpenter by trade) who brings order in Gwen's life. Emecheta's novel on incest is illuminating in the sense that she revises African American tragic concept of the incest victim as a childless crazy survivor such as in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, into a progressive ending of Gwen overcoming hurdles to give birth to a beautiful African daughter whom she names 'Iyamide'. The meaning of the term 'Iyamide' – 'my mother is here' – explicates Emecheta's trust in African womanhood. The essence of African woman as mother and the strength it encapsulates find expression in the name. Though in her 'feminine' novel *Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta deplors the yoke of motherhood succumbed to by women, in her 'female' novel *Gwendolen*, she casts motherhood as eagerly embraced by the liberated African woman. *Gwendolen*, who has overcome a good

number of sexual and racial and economic hurdles in her short life, is an emblem of the womanist in the African female. She is a progressive woman who has a balanced view on life and is on the path to individual selfhood and identity.

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