

# No Woman's Land: Marriage in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta

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## Abstract

As one of the major ways by which interaction between men and women is regulated in society, marriage has offered a useful yardstick for the assessment of gender relations in many works of African fiction authored by women. The paper examines the way in which the prominent female Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta portrays marriage in several novels, including *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Double Yoke*. Emecheta believes that many of the cultural assumptions which inform marriage gloss over the inherent contradictions that are inherent in its duality as institution and relationship. As institution, marriage ostensibly provides women with the best context within which to fully realise themselves as women; as relationship, the promise of such self-fulfilment is exposed as arbitrary and hypocritical. Many of Emecheta's principal female characters become aware of this disjunction, and it crystallizes the challenges confronting them as women in a patriarchal society. In this way, she shows how marriage, far from achieving its professed role of affirming the stability of culturally-sanctioned gender relations, actually disrupts them. This paper begins by examining the biological and social drives that underpin marriage, and the way in which they combine to make it an ambivalent condition for women, ostensibly celebrating their femaleness while entrenching their subordination to men. It then focuses on the concept, objectives and process of marriage as these are dramatised by characters and situations in Emecheta's novels. The paper concludes that Emecheta characterises marriage as essentially indefinable, with unfocused aims and conflicting processes.

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## Key words

Buchi Emecheta, Nigerian fiction, gender relations, marital relations

## Introduction

Perhaps more than any other feature of gender relationships, the phenomenon of marriage has engaged the attention of Africa's women

writers as part of what has been described as the almost congenial “experience of marginality” (Stratton, 1994, p. 15) that is the woman’s lot. As a subject of literary treatment, the marital relationship has received close attention in such memorable works as Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and *One is Enough*, Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, Nawal el-Sadaawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* and *Two Women in One*, and more recently, Zaynab Alkali’s *The Stillborn*. This essay proposes to look at perspectives on marriage which manifest in the fiction of Buchi Emecheta, a prominent Nigerian novelist based in the United Kingdom.

Marriage has been an arena for some of the bitterest battles of gender conflict. Regardless of what species of feminism they subscribe to, if at all, Africa’s women novelists have consistently probed the difficulties of marriage for women. Chukuma (1999, p. 82) claims that “[m]odern African women’s works do not show the romantic aspects of marriage. They rather portray the stresses and problems aimed at sensitising women to the harsh reality.” Nwapa (1966) has examined the problems of barrenness in *Efuru* el-Sadaawi (1983, 1985) has pointed out the ways in which marriage simultaneously defines and depersonalizes women in *Woman at Point Zero* and *Two Women in One* in *So Long a Letter*, Bâ (1981) has investigated the special agony that is the fate of the abandoned wife. The consistency of this focus upon marriage in African women’s writing is a clear indication of its pre-eminence as a site of gender relationships and the conflict that is its inevitable corollary.

Much of the controversy surrounding the marriage issue in modern African women’s fiction has to do with the way concepts of biology and gender are implicated within and impinge upon marriage as a social institution and as a specific type of relationship. Marriage is an arena in which biology and gender, the sexual and the social, interact in extremely complex ways. Perhaps the most obvious demonstration of this complexity is the way in which marriage simultaneously affirms and interrogates patriarchy. Marriage is founded upon both the biological distinctiveness and the biological complementarity of men and women. In other words, it exists because men are men and women are women, “opposite” genders for whom the marital relationship is the ultimate demonstration of an organic correlation decreed by God, confirmed by nature and entrenched in tradition. As a complementary relationship, marriage is the basis of procreation, and assumes the essential co-equality of men and women in the sense of interdependence rather than in the

sense of equivalence: Neither sex can produce offspring without the help of the other. Simply put, marriage is perhaps the only social institution where, biologically at least, men are as dependent on women as women are on men.

This fact is, of course, a source of considerable tension in many societies and is the basis of the cultural features which arise from the biological fundamentals of marriage and counteract the influence of marriage as the great leveller. If men and women are designed to come together in the marriage relationship, the rules under which they may do so are often more arbitrary than natural; it is here that the essential co-equality of marriage is transmuted into its opposite, that of dominance and subordination. Gender roles, the assignation of duties and obligations based on perceived notions of sexual difference, are inextricably intertwined with marriage and are, in fact, mutually constitutive of each other. These roles are imparted into members of society in a process of acculturation that is designed to prepare them for the various rites of passage, of which marriage is arguably the most important. Marriage is consequently the site of affirmation of the efficacy of such roles; it is the place of their fullest realisation, the location where male and female demonstrate their social status as husbands and wives by fulfilling the expectations placed upon them by society in the marital relationship.

The essential contradiction, therefore, is between the biological and the social aspects of marriage. The former is largely outside human manipulation; the latter is extremely susceptible to it. The question of whether the biological takes precedence over the social in marriage, whether the social takes precedence over the biological, or whether there is a meeting-point of some kind, is an intriguing one. Those who argue for the pre-eminence of the social will point to the notion of humans as social beings, and the status of marriage as an institution set up for the regulation of sexual relations and the family. Marriage, from this perspective, would seem to define the very essence of humanity: human beings are, after all, the only species known to engage in the practice of marriage. These arguments, however, do not obscure the opposing view that marriage is merely the outer shell of what is at heart a biological necessity. No matter how it is defined or ordered or arranged, marriage is critically dependent on the production of offspring, and that is a biological phenomenon.

Buchi Emecheta considers marriage an important theme, given its

significance for the delineation of gender relations. For her, marriage is a no woman's land. This perception of marriage conveys the way in which it simultaneously serves to raise the hopes of women and destroy those hopes. The spatial metaphor is appropriate, considering the general idea of marriage as a "state" or "condition," a privileged social/sexual sphere which confers enhanced social and sexual status upon those within it.

Just as overtly feminist notions of the no man's land conceive of it as contested yet unoccupied territory between opposing forces (Gilbert & Gubar, 1987), so does marriage apparently represent a liminal terrain whose very existence crystallizes the inherent tensions that characterize gender relations which are skewed in favour of one group to the disadvantage of the other.

Several critics, such as Palmer (1983) have accused Emecheta of an overt bias against men and marriage. One of the more trenchant criticisms comes, ironically, from female critic (Acholonu, 1988, pp. 221-222):

The rejection of marriage and all it stands for, runs through all [Emecheta's] novels. She defines matrimony as slavery, as 'a way of getting free sex', 'a legalised way of committing assault and getting away with it.' Hers is a crusade poised to debunk the myths of superiority of man over woman and the sacredness of the marriage institution.

Brown (1981, p. 36) more sympathetically argues that Emecheta's "criticisms of African men are often marred by generalizations that are too shrill and transparently overstated to be altogether convincing." This paper argues that Emecheta's attitudes to marriage are more ambivalent than extreme; what is radical is her sustained interrogation of the "sacred" institution of marriage and the men who are apparently its overwhelming beneficiaries.

Many of the best-known texts of African female writers have centred upon the nature of marriage, its shortcomings and the contradictions that characterize it. Emecheta seeks to demonstrate the essential ambivalence of the marriage institution, particularly the way in which it defies the expectations placed upon it, regardless of whether those expectations are held by men or by women. She does this by revealing what she perceives to be the essential indefinability of marriage, the resulting instability of

gender roles within it and the nebulousness of its objectives. Emecheta zeroes in on what she considers to be the fundamental paradox of marriage for women. In traditional and contemporary African societies, marriage is often positively portrayed (Amadiume, 1987; Ogun-dipe-Leslie, 1987) as the zenith of feminine achievement: It is the institution that legitimately enables a woman to carry out the female functions, biological and social, for which she has been groomed since birth. Yet it is also the institution which most comprehensively enforces cultural restrictions placed on the choices available to women and entrenches the double standards which underpin gender relations in society. Indeed, Emecheta (1986) has written of her own sense of failure in marriage as being due to a seeming inability to meet her obligations as wife and mother.

This paper examines several works of fiction by Emecheta. They include *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Double Yoke*. The depictions of marriage in these works will be analyzed from three perspectives: the concept, process and objectives of marriage. Concept refers to the idea of marriage, or its theory; process deals with the actual practice of marriage, or its performance; objective relates to the purpose of marriage, or its aims. An attempt will be made to analyze and explain Emecheta's idea of marriage as essentially indefinable and inherently contradictory, and therefore open to manipulation by the dominant gender in such a way as to make it almost meaningless. This will be followed by an examination of her portrayal of the process of marriage in which Emecheta exposes the arbitrary nature of supposedly stable gender roles by inverting them or rendering them inoperable. The goals of marriage as seen by her will finally be considered, with particular emphasis on what those goals are and whether they can ever be attained. Emecheta, it is argued, feels that the goals of marriage are fundamentally ambiguous and ultimately unattainable.

### **The Concept of Marriage: Defining the Indefinable**

As portrayed by Emecheta, the concept of marriage poses several problems of definition, regardless of whether it is considered within a traditional Nigerian context or outside it. She seeks to point out the contradictions and inconsistencies which riddle any definition of marriage

the moment one proceeds beyond conventional assumptions of the socially-recognized union of man and woman. Such definitions include that of *The Norton Dictionary of Modern Thought*, which defines marriage as a “union established between the sexes which may be singular . . . or plural” (Bullock & Trombley, 1999, p. 504). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2003) more comprehensively views it as a “legally and socially sanctioned union between one or more husbands and one or more wives that accords status to their offspring and is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe the rights and duties of the partners.”

Definitions like these, for Emecheta, are undercut by realities that cannot be accommodated within the constraints of those definitions. The word “union,” for example, presupposes the coming-together of equal partners in a mutually-agreed and beneficial arrangement. As far as Emecheta is concerned, marriage is not so much an institution as it is a relationship that is complexly shaped by the patchwork of values, attitudes, customs and behaviour that is collectively called “culture” and which is used to justify the desires of society’s dominant groups.

This contradiction is clearly seen when marriage is considered in the larger context of gender relationships. Marriage as an institution ostensibly enables the full realization of women as women, as wifehood and motherhood emerge as the natural accoutrements of biological femininity: It allows them to become socially female, rather than just biologically female. Yet, many of the marriages Emecheta portrays in her novels are in fact based on the objectification of women rather than a full recognition of their humanity. The practice of paying bride price, for example, is seen to have an overt, negotiable exchange value, turning marriage, in a fundamental sense, into a commercial transaction. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna “knew she would have to marry, and that the bride price she would fetch would help to pay the school fees for her brother Nna-nndo” (Emecheta, 1989, p. 65); in *Second-Class Citizen* “a girl was little more than a piece of property. Adah had been bought, though on credit” (Emecheta, 1980, p. 37); in *Double Yoke* “[a]n educated girl these days was not expected just to be a financial asset to her husband, but had to be so to her family as well” (Emecheta, 1982, p. 95). In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnaife asks “[d]id I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner?” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 48). Fathers in *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood* name their daughters Aku-nna (“father’s wealth”) and

Nnu Ego (“twenty bags of cowries”) respectively, names which speak as much to their literal as their metaphorical value. In the two novels, widowed wives are inherited in much the same manner as any other asset (Olufunwa, 2003). It is significant in this regard that there is a close correlation between the status of married women and that of slaves in *The Bride Price*. Frank (1984, p. 39) argues that “it is the slave girl . . . who becomes the archetype of African female experience in the novels of Buchi Emecheta.” Chukukere (1995, p. 174) claims that slaves and women “are denied social equality and both are subjected to restrictive taboos.” Ogundipe-Leslie (Davis, 1994, p. 68) believes that once a woman becomes a wife, “she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband’s family, except for what accrues to her through her children.”

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Emecheta contests preconceived notions of the concept of marriage is to demonstrate its amorphousness even within the restricted settings of rural Ibuza and urban Lagos where many of her novels are located. She depicts the workings of a bewildering array of marital unions, including arranged marriages, levirate marriages, wife capture, church and registry marriages. This diversity is a reflection of the circumstances which necessitate them and the consequently varying expectations they give rise to. A defiant Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* marries the man of her choice to the fury of her family; in *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna is kidnapped by a suitor who avails himself of the traditional customs that sanction it; *The Joys of Motherhood* portrays women in traditionally arranged marriages, unconventional (albeit sanctioned) sexual relationships and marriages which emerge from Western-style romantic relationships. *Double Yoke’s* Nko and *Destination Biafra’s* Debbie apparently reject marriage altogether.

Such variety is paradoxically demonstrative of cultural rigidity and cultural flexibility: The former, in that marriage, however defined, is obligatory for women in a way that it is not for men; the latter, in that marriage can take place under different, even unfavourable, conditions for women. In essence, marriage is distinguished by its diversity rather than by its adherence to a particular concept or a specific format, and because it can be made to mean many things, it ultimately ends up meaning virtually nothing, as its contradictions become ultimately unsustainable.

The essential indefinability of marriage is enhanced by the way in which Emecheta sets marriage at the core of other kinds of relationships

which serve to reflect and comment upon it in complex ways. There are the reincarnationist and pseudo-Freudian relationships between fathers and daughters, such as can be found in *Second-Class Citizen*, where Adah is her father's "come back mother" (Emecheta, 1980, p. 14) and *The Bride Price*, where Aku-nna "knew she held a special place in her father's heart" (Emecheta, 1989, p. 20). In addition, there are the affections and antagonisms between members of extended families and incongruous friendships that spring up in the soulless anonymity of urban conglomerations like Lagos and London. In comparison to these other relationships, marriage is meant to symbolize the most durable social connection of all, its very deliberateness standing in contrast to the chance and accident that characterize other affiliations. This supposed durability, however, is undermined by what Emecheta considers the ill-defined nature and often blatant contradictions underlying the objectives of marriage.

### **The Objectives of Marriage: Love or Duty?**

Emecheta's perception of the distinctions between marriage as institution and marriage as relationship is also apparent in what she considers to be the aims of marriage. Like the concept of marriage, she feels its objectives are difficult to pin down once certain basic assumptions are made. It is generally believed that the overarching purpose of marriage is to regulate sexual relations and build the families which are society's basic unit and without which it would ostensibly cease to exist. While that may be satisfactory at a theoretical level, in Emecheta's view it is inadequate at a more personal level. In her novels, she shows that broad agreement on the aims of marital unions is often confounded by cultural norms, social attitudes and personal idiosyncrasies which cause such objectives to degrade over time to the point of unrecognizability.

As described by Emecheta, the objectives of marriage may vary considerably, depending on the perspectives of a particular individual or group, and often contradict one another. Thus, husbands' ideas of the aims of marriage are often opposed to those of wives; a couple's perception of the purpose of marriage may be at variance with those of their relatives or their society. At its most fundamental, however, a characterisation of the purpose of marriage in the fiction of Buchi



Emecheta is divided on contrasting perceptions of what its main objective is: Is it love, the entrenchment of affectionate ties between husband and wife, or duty, the fulfilment of the gender roles prescribed by society for those in marital unions? Ordinarily, these two qualities would not seem to be mutually exclusive; they even appear to be implicated within each other. A spouse's sense of responsibility towards the partner and their offspring is not eliminated or obscured by affection. But when a marital relationship is overwhelmingly shaped by the requirements of the culture that are its context, the choices and possibilities that are available are stark in their narrowness. The difference between love and duty is a distinction whose ultimate irreconcilability for Emecheta is crystallized in the notion that female children are the result of romantic love while male children are inspired by duty (Emecheta, 1989, p. 197, 1994, p. 53). Because they are "only girls," female offspring are apparently indistinguishable from the sexual act: As girls, they can only symbolise the notion of sex as pleasure; male children, on the other hand, are the product of much more purposeful sexual activity: They are emblematic of the social aspirations implicit in marriage and therefore more demonstrative of the cultural imperative to procreate.

The production of offspring is indeed a pre-eminent objective of marriage (Mbiti, 1973; Radcliffe-Brown, 1950), constantly reiterated by all parties to the marital relationship— parents, in-laws, friends and the spouses themselves. It is the affirmation of the husband's virility, the confirmation of the wife's fertility, the incontrovertible evidence of a successful relationship. However, this general agreement on the necessity of children in marriage is offset by the different perspectives men and women bring to bear on it. For men, it is often an egotistical exercise in self-replication, as Nnu Ego's first husband indicates: "I have to raise children for my line" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 32). Nnaife's children "bear his name and will carry it to immortality" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 173). Closely related to this is the way in which marriage is seen by husbands as a legitimate outlet for satisfying their carnal desires: For Francis, "marriage was sex and lots of it, nothing more" (Emecheta, 1980, p. 45); Nnaife's "appetite was insatiable" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 44). Both men eagerly avail themselves of the various sexual opportunities open to them as men: Francis has affairs, Nnaife acquires more wives. For women, however, childbearing is symbolic of the way in which women are trapped in their very femininity. Adah wishes to be free of the "bondage of child-bearing" (Emecheta, 1980, p.

122). Nnu Ego moans, “I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 187). Unsurprisingly, they are not as enamoured of sex as their husbands—married women rarely enjoy sex in Emecheta’s novels— and lament the absence of romantic love in their marriages. Adah realizes that her husband “had never been taught to love” (Emecheta, 1980, p. 82); Nnu Ego similarly acknowledges that “loving and caring are more difficult for our men” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 75).

Even marital unions based on love are seen to fail, mainly due to social disapprobation. In *The Bride Price*, love and duty are opposed in the most direct way. Aku-nna’s responsibilities towards her stepfather and the tradition of which he is representative clash with her love for Chike and the nascent possibilities of romantic love that he embodies. Their marriage confronts traditional notions of the purpose of marriage on several levels. Its overtly romantic nature calls conservative ideas of arranged marriage in question; the absence of a bride price emphasizes the financial undercurrents that shape traditional marriages; Aku-nna’s wilful alliance with a social outcast questions the status of marriage as the primary means of ordering and legitimating sexual and social relations; its tragic end is a testimony to the strength of tradition, as well as its destructive capacity.

The distinction between sex and love further exemplifies how differently husbands and wives view the objectives of marriage. For the husbands, marriage is destination, not journey, and they have already arrived. For the wives, the reverse is the case, and given their self-perception as being at the receiving end of supposedly beneficial relationships, some of them articulate their wish for new marital objectives. Adah’s hopes are focused on her children: “My sons will learn to treat their wives as people . . . . My daughters . . . will marry because they love and respect their men” (Emecheta, 1980, p. 133). Nnu Ego is more desperate than hopeful: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 186). Such prayers are, for Emecheta, pointers to the arbitrariness of the gender roles which shape and are shaped by marriage as the framework within which they function, and consequently validates them.

## The Process of Marriage: The Instability of Gender Roles

Emecheta seeks to demonstrate that, as the setting in which gender relations are manifested at their most intense, marriage, more than any other relationship, exposes the essential arbitrariness of gender roles, the way in which what men and women do is more the consequence of culture and tradition rather than inherent biological limitations. Given its often-uncontested definition as the union of man and woman, it is critically dependent upon all partners in the union knowing what their roles within the relationship are and acting upon the basis of such knowledge. It is in this regard that marriage and gender roles define each other. Gender roles are organised along the supposedly unchanging categories of husband/father and wife/mother, with each partner being aware of the tasks and functions that are relevant to the performance of the requisite role.

Such roles are, Emecheta claims, not as stable as they seem. For one thing, gender roles, in marriage as elsewhere, are essentially complementary, a quality which simultaneously reinforces and disrupts the hierarchy implicit in traditional perceptions of gender roles. Complementarity entrenches such roles while at the same time implicitly acknowledging the possibility of co-dependence, by extension undermining the authority of the dominant gender. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego is told: “You are the mother of the man-children that made [her husband] into a man” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 159). She is essential to affirming her husband’s masculinity by helping him carry out the vital duty of siring offspring, and in so doing, fulfilling her own central role of procreation. Cooperation does not necessarily mean equality, however: As Nnu Ego herself acknowledges, “It is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 187).

The vagaries of human existence upset the stability of gender roles as they pertain to marriage, and this is seen *The Joys of Motherhood* when Nnu Ego’s mother Ona refuses to become Agbadi’s wife despite her love for him because her father wants male children: She is daughter and mother, but not wife. In the same novel, colonialism disrupts traditional perceptions of gender roles in ways hitherto unimaginable: Nnaife and his friend Ubani work as laundryman and cook respectively, functions that are reserved for women in traditional society. As Aidoo (1995, p. 17) observes: “When a black man is with his wife who cooks and chores for him, he is a man. When he is with white folk for whom he cooks and

chores, he is a woman.” The capitalist economy significantly affects gender roles (Steady, 1981) to the extent that it almost erases traditional notions of manhood: “Men here are too busy being white men’s servants to be men” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 51). In *The Bride Price*, established notions of masculinity and gender roles ascribed to men are complicated by the presence of Chike, whose pre-eminent eligibility as a bachelor is negated by his status as “the son of slaves” (Emecheta, 1989, p. 98). The very different cultural values of the West further unsettle established notions of gender roles. In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah’s initial hopes that relocation to England would improve her marriage are shattered by her husband’s stubbornly chauvinistic mindset: “He had been used to being worked for, by a woman he knew belonged to him by right” (Emecheta, 1980, p. 174).

The essentially unstable nature of gender roles and their consequently tenuous manifestation within the marital context are also seen in the manner in which several characters in Emecheta’s novels transgress the boundaries set by these roles, initially not out of a self-conscious desire to rebel or to gain equality with men, but because the sheer pressure of circumstances leaves them with no other choice. The main female characters in *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Joys of Motherhood* are the breadwinners of their families; in *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna appropriates her stepfather’s right to choose a husband for her; in *Double Yoke*, Nko takes for herself the supposedly male privilege of dispensing sexual favours.

It is significant that this assumption of ostensibly masculine roles is not deliberate. Indeed, many of these women are conscious of society’s stipulations in this regard. If her husband had lived up to his responsibilities, Adah “would have willingly packed up her studies just to be a housewife” (Emecheta, 1980, p. 179); Nnu Ego, too, does “not like men who stayed at home all day” (Emecheta, 1994, p. 113); Nko gives in to her boyfriend’s sexual demands without demur, even though she is a virgin (Emecheta, 1982). These are women who are fully prepared to live within the limitations of the gender roles imposed upon them by society and supposedly entrenched in marriage, but they find to their surprise that these roles cannot withstand the acid test of daily living (Little, 1973; Ogunyemi, 1996); in other words, their arbitrariness is exposed in a manner that is all the more telling because it is done by women who are so reluctant to do it. Emecheta does not seek to

portray a mere reversal of roles; She is claiming that their very stability is open to question and, by extension so is marriage which provides a context for the performance of those roles.

If Emecheta's female characters are made virile through the assumption of roles socially recognized as masculine, their male counterparts are often rendered effeminate through physical description and the enactment of supposedly feminine attitudes and social roles. When observed in the flesh, characters such as Francis and Nnaife acquire the corporeal prolificacy that is often associated with women: The former has a "belly bulging like that of his pregnant wife" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 81); the latter is "a jelly of a man" with "a belly like a pregnant cow" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 42). Size and vocal characteristics are significant too: Aku-nna's father is "a little man" (Emecheta, 1989, p. 10) with a "little voice whining like a hungry dog's" (Emecheta, 1989, p. 11). Having relinquished the role of breadwinner to their wives, Francis and Nnaife display the passivity that is supposed to be the woman's forte: Francis "cried, like a woman" (Emecheta, 1980, p. 69) when confronted with a child's illness; Nnaife is berated as a "lazy, insensitive man" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 91) for his indolence. Both men are consistently unable to initiate action to secure their personal wellbeing and that of their families. Such slothfulness stands in stark contrast to the assiduity with which they assert their conjugal rights.

The polarities of gender relations are reversed as women venture beyond the home in search of money and husbands become default caregivers to their children. The petulance with which the men take up this role only serves to emphasize the ostensible incongruity of the situation. Francis grumbles "I can't go on looking after your children for you" (Emecheta, 1980, p. 49) and Nnaife queries "[w]ho is going to take care of [their son] when you go out to sell your stuff?" (Emecheta, 1994, p. 86). These complaints are strikingly similar in their backhanded acknowledgement of inverted gender roles whose very instability testifies to the fragility of the assumptions which undergird marriage itself.

## Conclusion

This is a study of Emecheta's literary perspectives on marriage and their implications for women as demonstrated in fiction. She contends

that marriage is indefinable, that its objectives are ambiguous and therefore unachievable, and that gender roles within it are inherently unstable.

Caught as it is between hostile territories, the no woman's land that is marriage in the novels of Emecheta is as much limitation as it is liminal. Indeed, her central metaphor of marriage is that of confinement, encompassing restricted physical space, emotional isolation, corporeal entrapment and cultural imprisonment (Nussbaum, 1995; Stratton, 1994). The married women whose tales she tells live in cramped one-room apartments filled to overflowing with children, co-wives, in-laws and husbands. Those who reside in places like Lagos and London lack the support structures which would have enabled them to discuss their problems in an empathetic environment. Physiological functions like menstruation and childbirth lock them within the gender stereotypes that simultaneously justify and maintain their oppression. The cultural traditions which nurtured them provide them with an outlook on life which often works to normalize their predicament as inescapable. The metaphor of marriage as confinement is incorporated within the ambivalence of marriage in which wives are ensnared in the various paradoxes which characterize marriage and combine to make it ubiquitous to the point of invisibility: its amorphousness as a concept; its contradictory objectives; its arbitrary gender roles.

Trapped within the interlocking chains of multiple paradoxes, it would seem that there is no way out. The solution, however, seems to have been suggested by Emecheta herself: "Personally I'd like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn't work, for goodness sake, call it off" (Umeh & Umeh, 1985, p. 23). Her novels are peopled with women who "call it off," an action whose significance can only be truly assessed in inverse proportion to the brevity of that expression. They include minor characters like Adaku, Nnu Ego's ambitious second wife in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who takes her destiny in her own hands and defiantly embarks on a life of independent womanhood. There are also major characters like *Second-Class Citizen's* Adah, Nko of *Double Yoke* and Debbie of *Destination Biafra*. All of them confront the ambivalence of marriage with the certainty of hard-won conviction. Adah walks out of an abusive relationship, while Nko and Debbie decide to lead lives outside marriage. Significantly, the latter two have no intention of suppressing their femaleness: Nko is pregnant, and will raise the child herself; Debbie

plans to bring up children orphaned by the Nigerian Civil War. The primacy of marriage as a social ideal has been replaced by a new emphasis on self-worth, and a recognition that, married or not, women “should be able to realize and define themselves beyond wife and motherhood” (Arndt, 2002, p. 72).

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