

Gender Clash in Buchi Emecheta's and Kamala Markandaya's Major Novels

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Abstract. One often notices mutual bias, mistrust and a hurry to dismiss each other among the two genders. The cultural background, socio-political angles related to division of rights and duties, relative importance and relevance make this mistrust and clash inevitable. In the past, women willingly accepted subjugation of the self before social whims and accepted secondary status and this slave mentality made the masculine world feel secure, stable and comfortable on psychological and material plane. Lack of challenge made them defiant, arrogant, insensitive and authoritative temperamentally towards women. However, over the years the status of women has improved in many countries, if not all. Now that women have gained almost parallel status legally, there is a subdued sense of anger, aversion and aggressiveness in the opposite gender. Indian English literature and Nigerian literature throw significant light on the predicament of gender equation. The social axis is clearly tilted towards patriarchy. However, the burden to retain the institutions of marriage and family rests on the delicate shoulders of the feminine gender in both the countries of two different continents. The present paper discusses the depiction of gender in the novels of noted Nigerian authoress Buchi Emecheta and the acclaimed Indian novelist Kamala Markandaya. It compares and contrasts the status of women in the two different societies as depicted by these novelists.

Keywords : Patriarchy; gender; feminine; masculine, marriage.

It has never been easy to analyse and evaluate with neutrality the interrelationships of the two genders. Ensuring social mobility of the two genders on equal plane is a challenge which the modern society faces. The universally set pattern that men will earn and women will cook and feed the children is the basis of this interrelationship. Their roles have been almost cemented and defined with the passage of time.

Women, since ages have accepted the secondary status with gratitude and have felt obliged to abide by the rules set for them. They have always felt both safe and vulnerable at the same time. Safe because they have been granted protectors namely fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, a roof over their heads with families to belong to in this wild, unpredictable world. Vulnerable, because they felt threat from their protectors as their individualities were thoroughly crushed under the strong and mighty boots of masculinity on the pretext of providing protection.

In every society, it is the women who suffer on every front – be it finance, health, religion, social or emotional front, they have been assigned a secondary position. But as we all know, change is the law of nature. So, slowly and slowly changes have come in the mindset regarding the role of women in different societies. Many reform

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movements were organised for awakening the masses and make them realise the discomfort felt by women with the age old arrangement. People started raising voices of protests against the exploitation of time and energy of womenfolk. The backwardness and ignorance of half of the human race started posing threat to the development of the world at large. The requirements and lack of competent people in the fast changing world made things all the more difficult.

Now women are more aware, conscious and capable due to access to education to handle challenges and opposition coming from within and outside. And most importantly they are willing to accept the changing socio- economic scenario around them which allows them to step out of their homes to become financially independent instead of being labelled as economic liability on their men folk. Earlier, their contributions as home makers were taken for granted as it was the only available option for them to survive with dignity.

This psychological break-through achieved by women with the help of progressive people around, leads to clash of interests among the two genders. The unending saga of comparison and contrasts between the two genders has become a constant cause of concern for one and all. The tendentious comparison between the two genders regarding their capabilities in various situations and various fields of excellence spark off debates and discussions among social thinkers and intellectuals the world over. This gender debate has given much needed push and support to the cause of women's emancipation.

However, in spite of all these encouraging developments and trends, the vital question still clamours for an answer. And that is, how and when women will get their due share in society? How far will society allow this growth? Are we as society willing to accept their social mobility with economic security and to what extent? Can we as society reach the ideal goal of gender neutrality in every sense of the term? If yes, then how? How will society overcome its handicap of keeping half of human race away from progress and enlightenment? What will be the road-map to extricate innocent women and children from the clutches of orthodox societies? How to liberate rural women from traditional mind-set and urban educated women from being suppressed and subjugated within the four walls of joint family and protect both from being harassed at their homes and respective work places? What about pressures which demand sacrifice of their individuality as decision makers and then the issue of financial rights of earning women? Are women being allowed to become equal sharers in ancestral property? Are they able to look after their parents after marriage? What about their rights to decide motherhood?

If the answers to the above questions are negative then what next? Till when and how will society continue to keep half of the population away from active participation in this fast changing world equipped with modern technologies which is easily available to one and all? This forced exclusion of women will prove suicidal for

Gender Clash in Buchi Emecheta's and Kamala Markandaya's Major Novels human race ultimately. For, a woman who makes a family can also break a home in anger, vengeance and depression. The inter-relationship between men and women play crucial role in building not only families but society and the world at large.

Keeping these aspects in view, this paper presents study of women's status as put forth in Indo-English and Nigerian literature as literary figures the world over are considered to be the 'conscience keepers' of their respective societies. Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta and Indian writer Kamala Markandaya have been very vigilant and vocal about assessing their respective societies in this context.

Literary works of both the writers convey their belief that inter-relationship can best be judged through the institution of marriage. Marriage as an institution is under serious inspection here. Women in Nigerian society must become mothers or else they are reduced to the status of necessary evils who cannot be wished off. They are made to toil like slaves to prove their utility to their families. Buchi Emecheta is very vocal and assertive in her own way regarding women and their conflict with male dominance. Most of her literary works are based upon her own experiences as 'a single parent and a black woman living in Britain'. Various shades of womanhood torment and torture her intellectually enlightened mind. Her first work *In the Ditch* (1972) depicts the struggle of an abandoned wife. In almost all her novels, Buchi Emecheta keeps pondering over the institution of marriage and family in the context of women and their perspective, just like Kamala Markandaya who is equally agitated and aggrieved over this issue. Markandaya is however, more sober than Emecheta in her outpouring against men. Making her stand clear Emecheta declares:

Being a woman, and an African, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist....In my book I write about families, because I still believe in families. I write about women who try hard to hold their family together until it becomes absolutely impossible. I have no sympathy for a woman who deserts her children; neither do I have sympathy for a woman who insists on staying in a marriage with a brute of a man, just to be respectable.
(Emecheta, 239)

Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) depicts the hardships of a woman who is deserted by her husband and she has small children to take care of. *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) discuss the issues related to women and the confrontation between society and women. However, *Destination Biafra* (1982) is based upon a larger issue that affected the whole of Nigerian society. This novel dwells on men and children too as it deals with the Civil War in Nigeria which affected not just women but everyone else. When the very existence of a nation is under threat, family structure and gender clashes have no takers. Chaos and

disorder make life unmanageable for one and all.

The autobiographical elements dominate Emecheta's works. Her central characters are reflections of her own life and struggle. Emecheta is both fearless and immune as well as defiant towards public opinion. Her characters are suffering souls who become bold and rebellious out of pain and frustration. They make last ditch effort to survive against all odds. They are rudely rebuked and rejected. In the process, voluntarily or involuntarily, they break the norms. They fail to reconcile with their tormentors and are unable to rehabilitate themselves owing to the faults of others. They are victimized by society. Hence they revolt. Misfortune dominates the lives of Emecheta's female characters.

The concerns of Emecheta find an echo in the works of Indian women writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande etc. In fact, women occupy a central place in the novels of Kamala Markandaya too. She writes with a sense of moral binding, an obligation towards her own gender. Her writings reflect her sensitivity towards women when she weaves various female characters belonging to different class and status in her novels.

Markandaya's liberated women characters like Roshan, Helen, Mira are, in fact, the medium through which she gives vent to her pent up anger over the plight of Indian women. If justice, equality and liberty are not possible for women in reality, let it be granted in fictions. Here, she is close to Emecheta, but her characters rebel only for a very short span of time and revert to their traditional roles after deriving the satisfaction of breaking the norms and challenging the society. This is done only to show that women have an element of revolt in them, but they prefer to obey the family and society for its secure future but not out of fear, as it is generally presumed by society.

The women characters of Kamala Markandaya are always very intelligent. They are worldly-wise and practical. They often maintain good relation with their husbands and are tolerant of the male egos. They are devoted too. They are typical Indian housewives. Gender clash occurs in Kamala Markandaya's novels at a subtle level. Markandaya never uses rhetorical languages like Emecheta to highlight the plight of women. She weaves stories to explain the pitiable situation of Indian women who lack opportunity and goodwill to evolve as well-groomed social beings. Tacitly, she raises the issue of over-bearing presence of men in women's world. In the stoic silence of women, lies the key to their family and social life. In a patriarchal society, women feel that it is quite futile to raise issues of human rights and compassion.

What most women writers from India and Nigeria seem to stress is that self-development and financial self-reliance do not go against happy family concept prevalent in society. According to them, the concept of women's emancipation does not go against the traditional social set up which is essentially patriarchal in nature. Women themselves want a male as the figure head in the family, however incompetent he might be, for,

Gender Clash in Buchi Emecheta's and Kamala Markandaya's Major Novels they feel safe and secure in the traditional way of life. It gives them social safety and stable future as mothers and housewives.

The fact is that however persecuted the women may feel, they are not willing to totally discard the prevailing notions of male superiority in the name of gender equality. They are emotional about the prestige of their male members especially fathers and husbands, brothers and sons. They want to make them feel special and valued. At the same time women also want equality while keeping the status of men folk somewhat privileged and this the masculine world resent vehemently. Men feel their privileges at legal, religious, economic and social levels are being curtailed and offered to those who are already thriving upon their labour. The moral pressure to provide protection to the feminine gender under their roof tax their nerves no end. They feel complications will crop up within the family and chaos in social lives if women begin to interfere in every aspect of life. This is contested by women. They argue that self-reliance and social mobility will bring prosperity, equality and social security to one and all. They also argue that nature has given equal rights to all humans and till date its men have been encroaching upon the space allotted to women. And, they are staking claims on their share of rights and benefits and not claiming anything extra from the masculine gender.

The tendency of doubt, misconception and suspicion towards women has been a common phenomenon. Whether India or Nigeria, women as such are considered to be inferior mentally and physically. They are considered immature and reckless. Hence men fear giving freedom and power into their hands. It is this lack of faith in womenfolk that has been attacked by women writers, intellectuals, and social thinkers from time to time. Many reform movements have been launched in the past for the eradication of social evils and bias regarding feminine gender. A.S. Altekar in his book *The Position of Women In Hindu Civilization* has rightly observed:

One of the best ways to comprehend the spirit of a society or community and to appreciate its excellence and realize its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in it. (Altekar,1)

All the female writers have tried to examine the status of women in the institution of marriage and society.

Going through their works one notices that there are two types of reactions to the issue of gender bias. One group of female writers like Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali and Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya try hard to retain feminine delicacies and decencies despite all odds and negotiate with their tormentors to grant them equal status within the traditional social set up. They want patriarchy to continue with lesser degree of dominance over their male counterparts. While the other group of writers comprising Buchi Emecheta and Arundhati Roy have waged an all out war for fair distribution of rights and duties in every sphere of human life. They strongly feel that

feminine gender has suffered for centuries and now time has come to raise their voice for justice. They are aggressive and offensive in their writings and are defiant towards their critics.

Buchi Emecheta appears almost alone in her struggle for justice for women. Very few understand the depth of her pain and anguish. Her aggressiveness seems to undermine her contributions in the struggle for women's emancipation. She has failed to realise that human existence is inter dependent. Her bias towards masculine counterpart is understandable but her allergy towards her motherly responsibilities is difficult to understand.

Not only marriage but she is very critical about motherhood and its added responsibilities. She feels that women are emotionally exploited and exhausted by their children who hardly care to return their affection during old age with sincerity. Emecheta's attitude is best highlighted through the character of Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego speaks out Emecheta's prejudice against motherhood and mother child relationship in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

The bias, bitterness and frustration of a woman who has been abandoned by her husband is being expressed by Emecheta through Nnu Ego. The life of a woman is full of responsibilities and restrictions which is not the case with the masculine gender. A man is free to abandon his responsibilities at will and society is silently tolerant towards this tendency. This is unacceptable to Emecheta. She advocates and fights with all her might for equal distribution of rights and responsibilities. She has lost faith in her own self as she fears her children might abandon her in her old age just like her father. This fear of being left alone dominates her works. She seems to lack a sense of satisfaction of performing her responsibilities of a mother, and is gripped with persecution complex. This psyche has affected her creativity to such an extent that she has almost isolated herself from the rest of her contemporary female writers. Disillusionment has made Emecheta a rebel. However according to Chinua Achebe:

The writer must not be excused from the task of
re-education and regeneration that must be done. In
fact he should march right in front. (James, 9)

Buchi Emecheta is marching right in the front, vehemently protesting against gender discrimination and bias prevalent in society.

Buchi Emecheta's bold and blunt approach has somehow compelled her contemporary female writers to be extra careful regarding their views. They seem to be very conscious of the fact that they must appear convincingly different from Emecheta. They appear to be willing to accommodate and adjust with their tormentors rather than opting for direct confrontation as this confrontation will disturb the basic structure of society. Any change in the social structure is possible with the passage of time. Sudden change in the mindset of people is impossible. Women writers like Zaynab Alkali,

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Flora Nwapa, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya all strive in their own typical ways to combat gender inequality prevalent in their respective societies but resent being harsh and blunt as Emecheta. However hard the circumstances might have been in the past for the feminine gender, what prevents them from being hardliners is that they are aware of the fact that things have changed for the better and the efforts are on to bring about remarkable change in the lives of women.

However, even though women writers oppose extreme reactions, they are unanimous about the fact that women are subjugated to serve the interests of the masculine gender. And thus the institution of marriage is under severe scrutiny by the women writers of India and Nigeria. The role assigned by the traditional society to act as a support system, is making women more and more restless and uncomfortable with the passage of time.

As far as Indian writers are concerned, they too, feel depressed by the traditional role of women which demands abandonment of the self before their male counterparts. Writers like Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya want all kind of social security from marriage and at the same time, they want some space for themselves too.

Indian English women writers are not rejecting marriage and motherhood outright. Conjugal bliss and the joys of motherhood 'complete' them as 'women' and give them 'contentment'. However, their concern is that this completeness and contentment must not turn into control, confinement, curtailment and containment.

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