

Emecheta's novels: an autofiction production

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Introduction

A work of fiction is supposed to tell an imaginative story invented by the author. That is the reason why Abrams asserts that “fiction is any literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is invented instead of being an account of events that in fact happened.”³³⁹

In the meantime, some works are based on facts such as biographical and autobiographical ones. They consist on telling the story of a true human being's life. On the other hand, some works handle tactfully the mixture of fiction and autobiographical elements. Reading a book of fiction may lead to come across with actual facts related to the author's life. This technique led to the concept of autofiction which is in-between fiction and autobiography.

But allusion has been made by some critics such as Shalini Nadaswaran³⁴⁰ who consider Buchi Emecheta's literary production presenting autobiographical features. A substantial production of this author leads to a hesitating classification because elements of her life are spread all over her works such as *In the Ditch*, *Second-Class Citizen*, *Double Yoke* and *The Bride Price*.

Accordingly, the main question I am asking myself is to find out in which category can be placed Buchi Emecheta's works. Are they fictitious, autobiographical or autofictitious?

The allusion to Emecheta's literary genre has been done by many critics who consider it as autobiographical or fictitious. So at the first sight it can be said the Buchi Emecheta's works are really fictitious because they overtly bear the mark of the novel. The link between literature and genre is very intrinsic because whatever the text, its different traits or characteristics are used to classify it into a particular genre. In short,

³³⁹ M. H. Abrams. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. (7th Ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), p. 94.

³⁴⁰ Shalini Nadaswaran. “The Legacy of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Women's Fiction” in *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol. 2, No. 2, March 2012. This is also sustained by other critics such as Virginia U. Ola. “Art and Propaganda in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*” in *Utafiti*- Vol. 9, N° 1, 1987.

the genre determines not only the nature but also the specificities of a literary text. It also prepares the reader to what he or she is about to read. Being placed not in an appropriate genre may lead to disaster for literary criticism. Ducrot and Schaeffer give more light about this relationship when they put:

L'énonciation tout autant que la réception (qu'elles soient orales ou écrites) d'un message verbal ne sauraient se concevoir en dehors de la structuration selon certaines conventions ou normes, liées notamment aux fonctions qu'il est censé remplir. Bien entendu, les traits par lesquels sont identifiés les genres littéraires ne sauraient être ramenés à des contraintes pragmatiques, mais même les normes ou règles purement formelles ou thématiques ont un rôle apparenté : permettre au message, en l'occurrence à l'œuvre, de s'inscrire sur le fond d'un usage institué et partagé, d'un « horizon d'attente » (H.R. Jauss), fût-ce éventuellement pour signifier sa subversion. Comme l'avaient déjà noté les formalistes russes, l'identité d'un fait littéraire dépend de sa qualité différentielle, c'est-à-dire de sa corrélation avec les autres œuvres.³⁴¹

The above quotation is clear about the connection between literature and the genre. Before the reception of a literary work, the genre aids to identify and classify it among the other existing works. The interest of this analysis is threefold: it clears the reader about the literary genre of the author's production which is helpful to the understanding of some aspects of the work; it helps to classify Emecheta's production accurately, and it sheds light on the different traits this genre is made of. This analysis will focus on the different definitions of the concept of autofiction with a sight on its features and then show how they fit in Buchi Emecheta's literary production through the paratext and the theory of repetition.

1- Autofiction: definitions and features

It is worth mentioning that interpretations about this concept are as numerous as the scholars working on it. It has become a preoccupation of nowadays thinkers that a web site has been devoted to it: www.autofiction.org. That is the reason why we want to state clearly where we stand in this ocean of definitions. Before doing so, a broad presentation of this concept will be made through the analysis of thinkers like Serge

³⁴¹ Oswald Ducrot and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*. (Paris. Eds. Seuil, 1995), p. 626.

Doubrovsky, Vincent Colonna, Gerard Genette, Philippe Forest, Jacques Lacarme and Marie Darrieussecq.

The concept of autofiction was coined by Serge Dubrovsky although this literary genre is aged many years earlier as Ariana Kouroupakis and Laurence Werli put:

Si Serge Doubrovsky se pense l'inventeur d'un concept mêlant différents genres, force est néanmoins de constater que cette pratique ne lui est pas particulière, que ces 'cases aveugles' étaient déjà implicitement habitées par des écrivains pratiquant 'avant la lettre' ce procédé d'autofiction, cette hybridité des genres, tels Proust, Céline, Malraux, Genet ou encore plus près de nous Blondin, Modiano, Barthes, etc...³⁴²

Many scholars have used this genre but Serge Dubrovsky was the first to coin this concept of "autofiction". As far as the definition is concerned, they are as numerous as the scholars are. In fact, every thinker or critic has his/her definition.

From Serge Dubrovsky to Marie Darrieussecq, the different definitions of autofiction – which are not exhaustive – show that it is the use of the self to build a fiction. This consideration leads the reader to take into account two major elements that is the notion of fiction and that of the self which can be observable in an autobiography. The autofiction is thus the mixture of the two. And Martin Coyle is right when he asserts that any literary work should meet the criteria of its literary genre; otherwise, it will be a mess:

Characteristic patterns in the objective linguistic structure of the text will mark it as belonging to a particular text type or genre: for instance there is a typical metrical and rhyme scheme for Shakespearian sonnets, and a typical vocabulary and modality for weather forecasts.³⁴³

Actually, the whole of our study will be determined by the features of their literary genres. And the main questions we need to provide answers are the following: Are Buchi Emecheta's works purely fictitious? Are they autobiographical? Or are they autofictitious?

Talking about autobiographical genre, Ariane Kouroupakis and Laurence Werli write:

³⁴² Ariane Kouroupakis and Laurence Werli. Analyse du concept d'autofiction. A document from internet: www.uhb.fr/alc/cellam/soi-disant/index3.html accessed in April 2013.

³⁴³ *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. (Eds. Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcom Krisall and John Peck, London: Routledge, 1990), pp: 22-23.

Il apparaît donc de manière très nette que la conception du sujet privé est issue d'une évolution sociale, politique et idéologique et qu'en littérature, c'est à ce moment précis que l'on a parlé d'un genre autobiographique. L'idée que quelqu'un puisse faire le récit de sa vie, se mette en scène à travers l'écriture s'impose aujourd'hui comme une évidence mais cette rhétorique du moi n'est pas toujours allée de soi. Si l'on veut un fondateur, ce sera Rousseau, non parce qu'il a raconté tout mais parce qu'il le fait... Témoign et voyeur, le lecteur se veut alors confronter à la présence d'un sujet se livrant tout entier dans ce « je » qui se donne comme garantie de la vérité qu'il énonce, vérité qui n'a elle-même d'autre garantie que sa graphie. L'autobiographie ne se fonde pas ici sur un pacte qui lui serait antérieur ; elle entend être, comme énonciation, ce pacte lui-même.³⁴⁴

Since Buchi Emecheta has never made a full statement claiming that she is writing the actual story of her life through her works, it is not possible to classify them as sets of her autobiography. Furthermore, many events in her works have nothing at all with her life.

The identification of Buchi Emecheta's literary genre responds to the correspondence to autofiction features as explained by Kouroupakis et al.:

Une des clauses du contrat de l'autofiction consiste en l'établissement d'un pacte de lecture romanesque marqué le plus souvent par l'indication péritextuelle de "roman",³⁴⁵

The above quotation clears that the label "novel" shows the fictional nature of the work of art and this aspect is observable on covers of Buchi Emecheta's works under scrutiny. In *The Joys of Motherhood* and *The Bride Price*, this mention is visible on the bottom-right of covers whereas it appears just after the title of *Double Yoke*. This notification is on the top of *The Slave Girl*. The interest of this mention lies on the fact that this indication which is called pact guarantees that the work of art is a fictional one, without any allusion to real fact. But in the perspective of autobiography, it gives the opportunity to the author to mould his novels the way he wants in splitting his life into different sequences. Each of these parts will be used either as a central point around which a fictional plot is shaped or an element, a detail of the whole plot. The label

³⁴⁴ Kouroupakis et al., *op. cit.*

³⁴⁵ Kouroupakis et al.,

“novel” helps the writer to move easily from a character to another or even from a work of art to another.

Characters’ naming technique lies on the author’s own will and objective to be achieved in a story. Actual names or pseudo names are used to reach that aim. Regarding Buchi Emecheta’s fictitious works, no mention at all is made on her actual names. Are her characters’ names from personal relationships? What is dead sure is the fact that these names belong to the set of the anthroponyms of her native community. In the *Bride Price*, the main character is *Aku-nna* whereas in *The Joys of Motherhood* she is named *Nnu Ego*. The leading role is carried out by *Adah* in *Second-Class Citizen* whereas *Nko* is the heroin in *Double Yoke* and in *The Slave Girl*. The use of pseudo names enables the authoress to hide herself through the identities of her protagonists without revealing her own self. In this respect, Kouroupakis writes:

L’usage du pseudonyme et de l’homonymie qui gênait le processus autobiographique par le décalage instauré avec l’auteur, se révèle pour l’autofiction un partenaire de premier choix en tant qu’il permet justement ce détachement de l’auteur homme social envers l’auteur narrateur, et en l’occurrence de pouvoir s’inventer une identité sous le jeu de “pseudonymat fictionnalisant”³⁴⁶

In a literary genre as the autofiction which is a mixture of fiction and the author’s autobiography, pseudonyms are very important. The author uses other voices to tell a part of her own story. Sometimes, it is very difficult to dissociate fiction from the truth because the author’s identity can be shed through many egos such as individual ego, social ego and material ego. In many cases, the following combinations can be made: actual individual ego mixed up with fictitious social ego or vice versa, fictitious material ego mixed up with actual social ego or vice versa. The good handling of this technique creates doubt in the reader’s mind about the veracity of the story.

2- Autofiction: quest of the truth

The notion of the truth is the only means, the only way to establish a relationship between an author’s real life and his/her work of art; and by extension his/her literary production. The truth in Emecheta’s works under consideration will be revealed thanks to two main tools: Psychoanalysis and paratext.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Psychoanalysis is considered as the main means to scrutinize the inner part of the individual's psyche. This may help explore the ocean of Emecheta's mind in order to grasp the source of her inspiration. It helps to shed light on shadows of the unconscious motivation which are considered as symptoms or signs which may justify a behaviour or attitude. There may have a particular reason for the author to move towards herself so as to discharge a kind of bad stimulus which is stuck within her mind. The following words about psychoanalysis are explicit:

The psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud in which the therapeutic process occurs through a patient's saying whatever enters her/his mind without censorship (free association), which is interpreted by the therapist to the patient, who overcomes resistance to conscious acknowledgment of the interpretation using the energy of the emotional attachment (cathexis) he/she has transferred to the therapist; thus the patient becomes able to form new patterns of association which lead to better functioning.³⁴⁷

Psychoanalysis bears various features of the individual's mind but with the gist of our study, the focus will be put on the concept of repetition or repetition compulsion. In fact, the recurrence of some scenes, the description of some characters or information which may be considered as details appear very full of teachings, and can be used to explain things close to the author. According to this concept, Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology states:

The tendency to repeat unfinished or traumatic events in order to deal with them. The repetition can take the form of daydreams, storytelling, perception that present relationships are the same as old ones or emotional relations with a therapist that mirror those of childhood. In psychoanalytic theory, this is believed to be an attempt to deal with emotional conflicts from childhood and often takes the form of projections in therapy.³⁴⁸

The above quotation explains that repetition of facts is the need to re-experience traumatic situation and try to handle it the way one wants or simply to re-experience a good situation. And living in such a hostile male-oriented environment, women have less to say. In this respect, Basile Marius Ngassaki States:

³⁴⁷ *Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, (The), (Ed. David Matsumoto, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 127.

³⁴⁸ *Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, (The), p. 458.

The place of women in African literature reiterates themes on gender which grounded on quintessential paradigms within the vast domain of African culture. A frame which accepts women's silence tends to suppress individual self to the benefit of collective identity.³⁴⁹

Through female characters, female writers take control of what they have experienced so far to be re told in the way they want without any constraint from community's values. There is a need to re-appropriate what happened in the past and to handle it with care through repetition. As far as our study is concerned, repetition expresses itself through novels under consideration.

During this investigation, psychoanalysis will be coupled with paratext, a concept coined by Gerard Genette. It is an interesting means used to explore a work of art from the external point of view, through all published documents dealing with or connected to the work of art. Armand Colin defines it as:

L'étude d'un espace textuel qui "entoure" le texte lui-même à son début et à sa fin, d'une frange sans limites exactes qui assure une fonction de passage du hors-texte au texte et vice versa.³⁵⁰

In connection with this concept and all texts surrounding the main text, Genette writes that they are used "precisely in order to present it (the work of art), in the usual sense of this verb, but also in the strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its "reception" and its consumption, in the form, nowadays at least, of a book."³⁵¹ But this concept is not a unity; it is made of two other main parts: epitext and peritext. Both approaches will be used indistinctively and will overlap. The emphasis will be made on aspects which have considerably influenced the authoress and are residual, and aspects of her childhood. This is well-expressed through the following characters: father, husband and the self that is her own representation. This last point will be tackled in a further study.

³⁴⁹ Basile Marius Ngassaki, "Characters' Psychological Dimension in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" in *Safara*, (n° 728, January 2009), p. 96.

³⁵⁰ Andréa Del Lungo, « Seuil, Vingt ans après » Quelques pistes pour l'étude du paratexte après Genette in *Littérature*, 2009/3 n° 155, p. 98-111), p. 99. Also available in Internet: <http://www.cairn.info/revue-litterature-2009-3-page-98.htm> (april 2013).

³⁵¹ Gerard Genette and Marie Maclean, "Introduction to the Paratext" in *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, N° 2, Probing: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Spring 1991, pp 261- 272.), p. 261. Also available in Internet: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469037> (march 2013).

a- The father.

The image of the father in her works betrays the intimacy between the author and her father. The impact of this relation is so powerful that it stuck in the subconscious of the writer. In more than one novel under our scrutiny the reader can observe that type of relation. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the main character's father, Nwokocha Agbadi is very close to her daughter Nnu Ego and is very afflicted by his daughter's barrenness. Thoughts of Nnu Ego show it:

“The poor man suffers more than I do. It is difficult for him to accept the fact that anything that comes from him can be imperfect. I will not return to his house as a failure, either, unless my husband orders me to leave. I will stay with Amatokuwu and hope one day to have a child of my own”.³⁵²

Nnu Ego's father is seriously affected by her daughter's barrenness. He seems to be more concerned than her. This attitude is backed up with the concept of 'material me' as stated by Basile Marius Ngassaki in the following terms: “Our survival instinct and our love for the members of our family constitute the first element of 'the material me'. The acquisition of wealth is its second element”.³⁵³ This explains the reason why Agbadi wants to see Nnu Ego before dying. Through her existence and personality, he perceives the continuation of his own life. Actually, Agbadi considers Nnu Ego as part of his own life. The belief that the 'spiritual ego' is stronger than anything else, Agbadi thinks of the other life and the dead people he is going to meet. He cannot die without meeting Nnu Ego. What will be the answer if her mother asked after her? In this regard Emecheta states:

People die or should die gradually, familiarizing themselves with their loved ones on the other side step by step. Your father, however, kept coming back, waiting for you. He kept asking people, 'What will I tell my Ona if she asks me how our only daughter is? How could I tell her that I have not seen our child for the past ten years? No, I must hang on.' And he lay there suffering in silence³⁵⁴.

³⁵² *The joys.*, p. 33.

³⁵³ Basile Marius Ngassaki "Characters' names in Anglophone African Literature" in *Université, Recherche et Développement*, Saint-Louis, n°17, Janvier 2009), pp : 139-140.

³⁵⁴ *The Joys.* p. 158.

It is obvious from the above quotation that the bond between Agbadi and his daughter, Nnu Ego, is very tight. This kind of relationship is also observable in other Emecheta's works.

This sort of relation might reveal the unconscious inner part of the author because at the very first step it sheds light on what Freud calls the Oedipus Complex — The theory that children are torn between feelings of love for one parent while feeling a sense of competition with the other.³⁵⁵ The second step strengthens the first for it shows the relation with her mother which is weak and almost inexistent in novels under consideration.

The intensity of relationship between the main characters – who are most of the time female – and their fathers is obvious. The affection devoted to Adah by her father in *Second-Class Citizen* (p. 14) is a revealing hint. In *The Slave Girl* the sacrifice made by Okwuekwu to heal his daughter (p. 20) can be considered as the duty of a father towards his offspring but it is also the expression of the affection this father has for his daughter; the will and the need as well to keep alive this baby girl who is part of his flesh. It is worth noting that there is less affective depiction between the main characters and their mothers. This attitude fits well in the psychoanalytical concept of Oedipus complex.

But interestingly enough, repetition of this cliché in these novels fits with the theory of repetition as announced earlier. Concerning the father, the authoress repeatedly evoked an aspect which must be taken into account: his job. In fact, in most of works under scrutiny, father's main characters are railway workers. In *The Bride Price*, concerning the protagonist's father, the authoress puts:

Ezekiel Odia (...) was to keep his job at the Loco yard where he worked as a head moulder.³⁵⁶

The same working place is referred to in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnaife works in this place as “a grass cutter” (p. 142) and in connection with this place Buchi Emecheta writes:

In *the railway compound at Yaba, Lagos*, the grass-cutters did not need to worry themselves about what they would do the following day because before a week was out the grass would spring again ready to be cut.³⁵⁷
(Emphasis mine)

³⁵⁵ *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*. (2nd Edition, Bonnie R. Strickland, Executive editor, Farmington Hills: Gale Group, 2001.), p. 464.

³⁵⁶ *The Bride*., p. 8.

³⁵⁷ *The Joys*.,p. 142.

The railway seems to have a particular interest and impact on the author's life and psyche. Although an allusion to this working place may be considered as a mere detail, a random result, but the recurrence of this information is, in fact, the coming out, the reflection of the real aspect of her life in her production. Concerning Emecheta's life, the following words are clear that "Both of her parents were traditional Igbos (an ethnic group in West Africa), and her father was employed as a railway molder (sic)."³⁵⁸ This quotation sheds light on Buchi Emecheta's inspiration. In fact, if it appears that the author's scenes in novels are created at random, the above quotation shows that they are residuals of experienced facts hidden in the unconscious which express themselves. What is said earlier fits with the theory of repetition which considers it as the need to re-experience past events and here is about a joyful souvenir that of an intimacy between a father and his daughter. If the image of the father affects efficiently the author's psyche, so is the case of the husband.

b- The Husband

While repetition of events and facts portrays the father as an affectionate character, this technique sheds light on the ambiguity on the personality of the husbands in Emecheta's works. Nwokocho Agbadi is a very kind character as far as his relation with his daughter is concerned, but he is very harsh and insensitive with his wives (The Joys: 16). Nnaife is presented as irresponsible in the same work (p. 90). Pa Palagada is also referred to as a lazy man (The Slave., p. 95). Chapter 6 of Double Yoke reveals violent tendencies of Ete kamba. Okonkwo in The Bride Price reveals to be a vile personage (p. 72). In Second-Class Citizen, Francis, Adah's husband is no exception and certainly the worse of all of the above mentioned husbands. The fact that all characters playing the role of the husband in Emecheta's works are presented as devil's followers result from the complex network of her sub-consciousness. She cannot refrain from repeating the same bad image over different stories showing the various selves of a husband; a kind of criminal. This is part of her own experience as depicted in her biography.

The reading of Emecheta's biography reveals parallel and similarities between her husband Francis and her male characters' attitudes and behaviours as husbands. Concerning Emecheta's inspiration, Ernest N. Emenyonu writes:

Many of the reflections in Emecheta's novels are of her own life and the lives of people close to and around her. She asserts that the events that found her "in the ditch" and submerged her humiliatingly as a "second-class citizen"

³⁵⁸ *Gale Contextual encyclopedia of World Literature*. Anne Marie Hacht and Dwayne D. Hayes, London: Gale engage Learning, 2009), p. 560.

are “90% autobiographical.” Through the events in her personal life, Emecheta articulates the oppression, predicament, and precariousness of African women...³⁵⁹ .

There is no more doubt about Emecheta’s impulse in her writing. This passage provides two interesting pieces of information. It first confirms that the author draws from her own life what is, in some cases, the gist of her literary production. This may give explanation and justification of the repetition of particular scenes. The last interesting detail comes from the author’s words. In fact, in asserting that 90% of two of her novels are autobiographical, this confirms our position when saying that her literary production is autofictional for it is obvious the 10% remaining is fictitious. So, they are the mixture of autobiography and fiction. The external influences from the father and the husband on the authoress is patent, her own image is very evocative when considered.

Conclusion

The main concern of this analysis is about Emecheta’s literary genre. And this scrutiny was led by two main questions: what is Buchi Emecheta’s literary genre? And what are the different features which reveal her literary genre? Most of critics consider her literary production either fiction or autobiography. The reading of her novels reveals that there is in Emecheta’s books a mixture of both fiction and autobiography.

Two main theories helped to answer these questions and to make things clear: Freud’s theory of repletion compulsion and Genette’s paratext. The very first aims at scrutinizing the repetition of some details which in fact reveals motivations of the author and the state of her mind; the second one reveals life of the author through information surrounding her literary production that is the concern of the paratext. A sight in novels under consideration can also betray worthy information about the authoress. The implementation of these theories reveals that Buchi Emecheta uses autobiographical aspects to shape her books. During an interview, she almost avows that:

“Well, I admit that I’m not really very creative. I have to experience something or know someone who has seen something in order to write convincingly.”³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ Ernest N. Emenyonu. “Technique and Language in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride, The Slave Girl and The Joys of Motherhood*” in *Emerging Perspective on Buchi Emecheta*, (Ed. Marie Umeh, Asmara: Africa World Press, 1996), p. 252.

³⁶⁰ Interviewed by Julie Holmes in *The Voice*, July 9th, 1996.

<http://emeagwali.com/nigeria/biography/buchi-emecheta-voice-09jul96.html> , retrieved January 12th,

Emecheta's life is thus her raw material, the basic element which she uses to draw her literary production. This is reinforced in the very first line of her autobiography, the authoress writes:

For someone who has previously published more than ten books, writing an autobiography should be a fairly easy task. One has simply to look back into oneself, lift the lid off the great past and allow its timelessness to overflow into the present through the channel of one's pen on paper. But writing my autobiography is not going to be easy. This is because most of my early novels, articles, poems, and short stories are, like my children, close to my heart. They are too real. They are too me.³⁶¹

The use of her own life as a starting point to write her books and all the traits which appear in her literary production are sufficient to assert that the autofiction is her literary genre. The combination of her life with the indication of "novel", the use of pseudo names are main clues to assert it. The focussing on the self to draw efficiently the situation of the African woman in general is the proof of the mastering of the writing techniques. This is enough to enhance the merit and the prestige of the authoress.

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³⁶¹ Buchi Emecheta. *Head Above Water*, Introduction, 1986.

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