

DOUBLE-THINK IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *DOUBLE YOKE* (1982)

Double Yoke was written in 1981 immediately after Buchi Emecheta's return to England from a period spent lecturing on creative writing to students of the University of Calabar (UNICAL) in Nigeria's Cross River State, after which she returned to London "appalled and exasperated."¹ Set on a university campus in the 1980's, the novel tackles the contradictions which surround the educated, both men and women, in contemporary Nigeria in a direct and uncompromising way. Originally intended to be entitled *Prostitution: Nigerian Style*, the novel was eventually published in 1982 as *Double Yoke*, a film being made in Nigeria in 1985.²

In respect of meaning and authorial intention, this novel represents a significant change of focus for Buchi Emecheta. Whereas in her previous novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), her female protagonist, Nnu Ego, is illiterate and completely subjugated to tradition, Nko, the female protagonist of *Double Yoke* is a female undergraduate at the University of Calabar. Ironically, Buchi Emecheta's characterisation shows that, even in the supposedly most enlightened context within Nigerian society, young, educated females are also subjugated to male domination, and Nko is made to plea for female emancipation on her university's campus just as Nnu Ego would have done in her village.

Towards the end of *Double Yoke*, Buchi Emecheta has Miss Bulewao, the fictionalised representation of herself as creative writing lecturer at UNICAL, remark to her students: "You'll be surprised to know that many famous writers write autobiographically." (*DY* 156).³ While Calabar undergraduates might be surprised, it comes as no surprise to Buchi Emecheta's own readership. Most of her previous published works have been about the author herself. In *Double Yoke* she presents herself as Miss Bulewao, introduced with "a jaunty touch of self-caricature",⁴ with no attempt, apart from the name of disguise. The novel differs from all her other creations in which women have been the central protagonists, in that the story is told by

¹ Petersen, Kirsten Holst. 1988: Unpopular Opinions: Some African Women Writers. *Kunapipi. Special Double Issue. Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*, vol. VII, nos. 2 and 3: 117.

² In an interview with Davidson Umeh and Marie Umeh, published in 1985 in *Ba Shiru*, vol. 12, n° 2: 25 she said: "I've already started my seventh novel, *Prostitution: Nigerian Styles*." In a note the authors of the interview add: "Subsequently published with the title *Double Yoke* (London and Ibusa: Ogwugwu Afor, 1982). Emecheta returned briefly to Calabar in 1985 to co-direct filming of this novel, which is set at the University of Calabar."

³ Emecheta, Buchi. 1984: *Double Yoke*. London, Fontana African Fiction, abbreviated *DY* for the purpose of quotations. Hereafter all page references in the text are to this edition.

⁴ Updike, John. 1984: Three Tales from Nigeria. *The New Yorker*, April 23: 125.

Ete Kamba, a man, an aspect which generated some absurd criticism.¹ Through the creative writing assignments she sets her students, Miss Bulewao shows these young Nigerians, and Buchi Emecheta shows her readers, how people must learn to combine two rôles in order to survive, that is, they must take on a 'double-yoke'. Furthermore, this is not an option, according to Miss Bulewao and Buchi Emecheta, but a fundamental requirement if we are to lead happy lives. The bulk of the novel *Double Yoke* is presented as Ete's creative writing assignment, who heeding Miss Bulewao's advice that "oneself was always a very good topic to start writing about," (*DY* 18) decides to write about his relationship with Nko. He "was going to tell the world how it all had been, between him and his Nko, until Professor Ikot came into their lives." (*DY* 20).

In a rapidly-changing, independent Nigeria, communities are being placed under increasing pressure to transform traditional institutions and behaviour patterns into ones better adapted to the exigencies of Western social systems whose market economies and capitalist system depend on high social mobility and higher education. The situation on the UNICAL campus is indicative of the moral disorder the whole society is suffering from as it passes from a traditional value system, generally upheld by the colonial administration, to a post-colonial, Western one. The transformation of young traditionalist Nigerians into 'modern' African women and men, with the taking on of multiple burdens that that involves, is paralleled by the transition from one value-system to another. The transition period, however, is characterised by moral confusion and disorder; it is difficult to know what is right and what is wrong. Ete Kamba's revenge, Nko's use of what she calls 'bottom power' to ensure she gets a first class degree, Professor Ikot's use of his institutional power to take advantage of Nko, are all unethical behaviour. Society forfeits its sound moral base, a factor which makes burden-bearing that much more difficult and complex. The changes required in individual attitudes are profound; fundamental institutions such as courtship, marriage, the family, rôle-models, social attitudes, ethics and morality, and the relationship between women and men are all affected. Within such a 'modern' society, persons must learn to accept multiple responsibilities and develop a flexibility of mind as an individual which will bring about the acceptance of previously unacceptable conditions. In short, for the sake of their own happiness and those around them they must be prepared to become 'new', 'modern' African men and women. This is basically the message of *Double Yoke*.

All the characters of *Double Yoke* already bear multiple burdens or are in the process of acquiring them. As a young Ibibio man, one of Ete Kamba's burden is to find a wife. His traditional self tells him he must marry an "innocent, yet educated, not so young modern African woman" (*DY* 65) who, on their making love for the first time, would shed "the virginal blood his mother and friends had talked to him about." (*DY* 65) Perceiving himself as "that prehistoric man, that ancient lamp bearer lighting her way from innocence into maturity,"

¹ See Bruner, Charlotte and David. 1985: Buchi Emecheta and Maryse Condé: Contemporary Writing from Africa and the Caribbean. *World Literature Today*, vol. 59: 11.

(DY 65) Ete Kamba wants a wife who is like his mother, “easy to understand” with “no little secrets” (DY 67):

(...) after seeing the way his parents lived, he would like to live like that. Not as poor perhaps, but with a woman who would be like his mother, but with this difference; she must be well educated. Yes, that was the type he would like. A very quiet and submissive woman, a good cook, a good listener, a good worker, a good mother with a good education to match. But her education must be a little less than his own, otherwise they would start talking on the same level. (DY 32)

His second burden is to get a university degree. But, like the wish for an educated wife, this introduces a paradox; education, especially a liberal university education, opens up new windows of opportunity and real alternatives to students, both men and women. Indeed, the whole purpose of any type of education is to create new options for the individual. However, through their education, university students are distanced from their parents' scripts for them and newly-acquired perceptions and attitudes force them to consider alternative ways into adulthood. This means that Ete Kamba's first burden is made even heavier by the second, making it difficult for him to maintain his equilibrium.

A similar difficulty faces Nko, Ete Kamba's girl-friend and the main female protagonist of the novel. As a high school student she decides she wants to marry Ete Kamba and have his children. At the same time she wants to get a university degree so that she can provide for her mother and brothers once her sick father dies. Thus, like Ete, Nko bears two burdens; first, the responsibility towards the members of her own family and second, the need to get a university degree so that she will be sufficiently independent and well-off to fulfill her first responsibility. Added to this is her deep conviction that she will be Ete Kamba's wife. Again, the weight is unevenly distributed across the yoke and built-in contradictions regarding Nko's objectives cause her to evolve rapidly into “a modern African lady,” (DY 158) leaving the less-pressurised Ete “still lagging ... oh, so far, far behind.” (DY 158) The fundamental difference between Ete's handling of his burdens and Nko's handling of hers is that, while the former carries his yoke in the traditional, male-contrived value system, Nko has learned that in order to survive she must carry her double-yoke on her own terms, refuting entirely all male-dictated constraints that society pretends to impose on her. Buchi Emecheta's advice to young women seems to be: ‘Accept the double yoke, the multiple responsibilities of womanhood, but on your terms, not those dictated by a male-dominated society!’

The other main protagonist of the action of the novel, Professor Dr. Elder Ikot, is a man who carries multiple yokes. As with Sister Dr. Mrs. Edet, the number and weight of his yokes are signalled by the number and significance of the titles that precede his name. Apart from being a university professor, Ikot is a husband and father, an Elder of the Revivalist Church, the Dean of the Faculty, Head of the Cultural Department and an aspirant for the Vice-Chancellorship of UNICAL. Such is his power that, on being found naked and bleeding in the street in

the middle of the night, as if in a drunken state, his explanation causes the State Governor to apologise “on behalf of all the Calabar people to the Reverend Professor.” (DY 154)

Ete’s portrait of Professor Ikot is a caricature and, an indirect victim of the academic blackmail he subjects Nko to, he condemns him utterly, leaving him naked on his office floor - “he was bleeding, he was peeing; he was dribbling; his breath smelt sour and Ete Kamba felt revulsion.” (DY 146) But Buchi Emecheta does not allow him to fail; men of Professor Ikot’s worldliness, power and experience are not that easily brought down. A practised politician, Professor Ikot is able to twist the truth to his own advantage and survives because he knows how to play the power game. While for Ete his final punch leaves the Professor totally incapacitated for ever, Buchi Emecheta knows from her longer experience that such men are not put down so easily and can quickly bounce back. It would be unrealistic to allow Professor Ikot to fail.

The same applies to Sister Dr. Mrs. Edet, who also bears multiple yokes as academic, lecturer and helper at the Revivalist meetings. Again, Ete’s characterisation of her is a caricature “giggled like a silly schoolgirl” her “tall, skinny, near flat chested figure looped in the dark shadow by the dining-hall door like a giraffe hunting for fruits from the top of a tree.” (DY 83) But as with Professor Ikot, although a figure of fun and a subject of derision for Ete Kamba, Buchi Emecheta does not permit Sister Dr. Mrs. Edet to lose her credibility. Edet successfully combines all her responsibilities in a systematic and organised way, taking her duties as a lecturer in Religion in the Department of Humanities such as essay-marking and tutoring. Thus, although ridiculed, humiliated and condemned by Ete Kamba, the story-teller, Buchi Emecheta, Ete’s creator, refuses to allow them to fail and even restores their credibility in their multiple rôles. Although they are both hypocrites and “religious fanatics” (DY 103) in the eyes of their students, Buchi Emecheta has the more experienced Mrs. Nwaizu say of Dr. Mrs. Edet: ““These women [women like Dr. Mrs. Edet] are our pioneers; you must not forget that. They worked to achieve their academic positions, and they still would like to be seen as the pillars of tradition. What a burden!”” (DY 104) Buchi Emecheta implies, therefore, that credit should be given where and when due, no matter how detestable the person receiving it.

But the problem is, who is the reader meant to listen to - Ete Kamba, Buchi Emecheta or both at the same time? Is the creative writing assignment Ete Kamba’s story, Buchi Emecheta’s story or an amalgam? The narrative structure of *Double Yoke* requires that the reader resort to a kind of double-think.

By setting her novel on a university campus, Buchi Emecheta places the theme of higher education centre-stage. As in her other novels, she shows education, in this case higher education, to be the passport to economic success and personal fulfillment, the stepping stone to the middle class. But she also shows education to be a double-edged sword: it leads to greater freedom of thought, an increased number of options and, for women especially, emancipation. The problem is that, once one has set out on the path to higher education, there is no turning back.

The incorporation of different voices in the narrative of *Double Yoke* is also evident in the characterisation of the 'new African woman'. Buchi Emecheta presents Nko as a kind of embryonic 'new African woman'. Intelligent, pretty and shy, Nko is "a direct and straightforward girl" (*DY* 127) who has spent all her life up to the time of her admission into UNICAL in an Efik village. By the time she gets to university, she has allowed herself to be made love to by her boyfriend who doubts whether he is the first lover she has had. This factor becomes the catalyst of Nko's transformation into a 'new African woman', a transformation made possible and brought about by her presence on a university campus. For Nko, and for Buchi Emecheta, the UNICAL campus provides a suitable context for her *rite de passage* from innocent village maiden to emancipated feminist. In the event, Nko has no choice but to change:

She must either have her degree and be a bad, loose, feminist, shameless, career woman who would have to fight men all her life; or do without her degree, and be a good loving wife and Christian woman to Ete Kamba and meanwhile reduce her family and herself to being beggars at Ete's table. (*DY* 133)

At the university Nko discovers that academically she is not up to the levels required and, therefore, in order to get educated and Ete Kamba, 'that inner fulfilment', she has to surrender her body to her Professor at the risk of losing them both.¹ But once her decision is taken, there can be no turning back. If Nko had decided to leave university and return to her village, she would not have obtained a degree and she would probably have lost Ete Kamba. Nko is not going to listen to tradition and she will prove that to have children out of wedlock is not only a masculine preserve. She is going to have Professor Ikot's baby and without feeling ashamed of it. She will then go back to university and finish her degree: "I am not going to abort or anything. It should arrive during the next long vacation. My people will be shocked, but they will forgive me. One thing they are not going to hear from me is the name of its father. I am going to make it clear that it is not Ete's child." (*DY* 155) Clearly speaking the mind of Buchi Emecheta, Miss Bulewao insists that Nko can look after her own child and that she is already the 'new African woman'.

Nko has broken the rules and social norms which tradition places on the female: the woman must be a virgin on the day of her marriage and Nko fails on that score, she must be faithful to her fiancé and she has an affair with Professor Ikot, and also she decides to have the child fathered by Professor Ikot which goes against the law forbidding females to give birth to children outside marriage. She may fail to follow the norms tradition has marked out for her but she succeeds as an individual because she knows what she wants. From the very beginning, contrary to Ete's doubts, she is sure of her love for Ete: "(...) I love you. I want you to

¹ I agree with Rhonda Cobham-Sander when she states in 1986: *Class Vs. Sex: The problem of Values in the Modern Nigerian Novel. The Black Scholar*, vol. 17, n° 4: 24 "Emecheta's handling of the issue of academic corruption and women's exploitation of 'Bottom Power' to achieve academic ends is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the novel."

love me too. But you don't seem to know what you want. I want you as you are, as against your wanting me as you think I ought to be." (DY 66) As Dr [Mrs] Helen Chukwuna writes: "She wants to succeed in life as a woman desirable in her own right and as a qualified educated woman, financially capable of looking after her aspirations."¹

The title of the book is clearly symbolic and its meaning is made clear on several occasions throughout the novel. As Olga Kenyon puts it, the title is "slightly overworked, but functional."² It refers to the impossible double burden which both African women and men must bear in a modern, rapidly-changing society, where they must meet the demands of tradition and those of contemporary society. Thinking processes, both male and female, are presented and, according to Florence Stratton, "to promote gender equality" is the main ideological function of the novel.³ Buchi Emecheta's defence of women's rights becomes much more overt, but there is also compassion for male problems.⁴ By the end of the novel, the essential justification for marriage emerges: love and companionship. Ete at last shows remorse, courage and understanding in going back to Nko. Nko's father has died and Ete goes with her to the village. Miss Bulewao's last comment, addressed to her all-male class, reads:

'It's nice to know that many of you are bearing your double burdens or yokes or whatever heroically. The community burden of going home with the person we care for to bury her dead, and yet the burden of individualism - that of knowing that we are happier in somebody's company, however tainted we may think he or she is. Women do have to make these decisions too you know.' (DY 159)

Although in *Double Yoke* feminist tenets are presented as a justified and valid foil for Nigerian male chauvinism, Buchi Emecheta has always defended the argument that the aims of Western feminism are too extreme for the needs of Nigerian society. Buchi Emecheta would agree with Katherine Frank when she argues that Western feminism in Nigerian society is contradictory because:

(...) feminism, by definition, is a profoundly individualistic philosophy: it values personal growth and individual fulfilment over any larger communal needs or good. African society, of course, even in its most westernised modern forms, places the val-

¹ Chukwuna, Dr [Mrs] Helen 1989: *Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta* in Otokunfor, Henrietta and Nwodo, Obiageli eds. 1989: *Nigerian Female Writers. A Critical Perspective*. Lagos, Malthouse Press Limited: 7.

² Kenyon, Olga 1991: *Writing Women. Contemporary Women Novelists*. London, Pluto Press: 131.

³ Stratton, Florence 1994: 'Their New Sister' Buchi Emecheta and the contemporary African literary tradition in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. London: Routledge: 131.

⁴ Olga Kenyon refers to the males in the novel as being "like Victorians in being brought up to expect submissiveness from their women folk, while the outside world suddenly imposes conflicting ideals." *op. cit.*: 131.

ues of the group over those of the individual with the result that the notion of an African feminist almost seems a contradiction in terms.¹

It is the characterisation of Ete Kamba, a man deeply embedded in his society's traditions, that the primacy of the group ethic over individual self-interests is presented. However, by the end of the novel, in sympathy with her over her father's death, Ete comes to love Nko as an individual, breaking according to Florence Stratton "with one of the strongest traditions in female fiction: that of derogatory portrayals of men."² As Marie Linton Umeh writes, "*Double Yoke* is a love story told in the blues mode. (...) a love story with tragic implications (...) the tale of the terrifying journey of the possibilities and failures of love."³ The story has a happy ending, although many critics agree it is not plausible. Marie Umeh writes: "This ending is not altogether convincing even in these modern times. It then becomes obvious that author Emecheta is ascribing her personal modes of thought though they may be way ahead of her audience. Most of us are still very conservative."⁴

Buchi Emecheta's novel defends Nko's convictions as an individual which have been successful. Marie Umeh thinks that by fusing the old and the new, "traditional African society's intolerance of one's right to choose one's destiny rather than consider the common good seem to be strengthened."⁵ Though Buchi Emecheta tries to present Nko as the 'new African woman', the really emancipated new woman in *Double Yoke* is Buchi Emecheta herself, disguised within the character of Miss Bulewao, who "though not the type of New Woman they had been taught to regard as beautiful, (...) knew how to handle herself together." (*DY* 13) Moreover, the idea is reinforced contrasting Nko with Arit, the hairdresser, trained by a 'been-to' and whose behaviour has been influenced by her experience in the city, and with Victoria, the prostitute who accompanies Ete, Nko, Awero, Akpan and Isa on an excursion the Cross River State Museum at Oron, a vital and frank girl who lives for the moment. Buchi Emecheta appears to infer that those girls who choose to leave their home villages to study a profession in the city achieve worldliness and emancipation more quickly and more surely than their 'academic' peers who get places in universities, and that a university education does not necessarily transform young people into 'modern' men and women. The essential catalyst of transformation is experience, which, as for Nko, can be gained through anguish but which nevertheless leaves her a more complete and happier person, no matter how "tainted we may think he or she is." (*DY* 159)

¹ Frank, Katherine 1984: Feminist Criticism and the African Novel. *African Literature Today*, n° 14. *Insiders and Outsiders*: 45.

² See Stratton, Florence *op cit.*: 131.

³ Umeh, Marie Linton 1986: Reintegration with the Lost Self: A Study of Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* in Boyce Davies, Carole and Graves, Anne Adams eds., *Ngambika. Studies of Women in African Literature*. Trenton, N. J., Africa World Press: 173.

⁴ *Ibid.*: 179.

⁵ *Ibid.*: 179.

Miss Bulewao has to live abroad to achieve independence and emancipation, however in her privileged position as a teacher, can help their sisters achieve freedom to. Buchi Emecheta's return to Nigeria after almost twenty years of continuous absence provokes spontaneous criticism of aspects of Nigerian society and the quality of life in her home country.¹ Using Ete Kamba's fictionalised autobiography as a vehicle, Buchi Emecheta frames her comments and observations in such a way that the young Nigerian undergraduate takes full responsibility for all adverse criticism. As a very long-term 'been-to', she is more a Londoner than a Nigerian in the eyes of her countrymen and thus unqualified to make judgements. However a writer like Buchi Emecheta cannot resist the temptation to comment creatively. *Double Yoke* is the result. Yet the ending of the novel is unclear. Does Ete Kamba marry Nko eventually? The outcome of their multiple burden-bearing is left vague and unspecified. In the same way, Buchi Emecheta does not know where all her burden-bearing will lead her. The sub-text of the novel reveals her own deep anxieties about herself, the various burdens that as a Nigerian woman in London she has chosen to bear and the ambivalence that they entail. First she allows her ego-centricism to surface momentarily, but as the novel progresses "the most talked about female writer in Nigeria, and maybe in the whole of Africa" (*DY* 13) struggles to retain her dignity and magnanimity in difficult circumstances. Buchi Emecheta bases her advice on her own bitter experience of having to cope as wife and mother in two worlds. She returns to the land of her mother to attempt to savage young minds by imbuing them with the tenants of feminism. However, in spite of - or perhaps because of - the feminist dogma she preaches, Buchi Emecheta finds she is a stranger in her own motherland. Ultimately, in the kind of double-think the reader has to resort to in *Double Yoke*, Buchi Emecheta's own voice stands out above the rest.

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¹ In an interview with Adeola James, Buchi Emecheta said she got into trouble several times at the University of Calabar because she wrote about what annoyed her. She became very unpopular, "so much so that at one time President Shagari himself replied." See James, Adeola ed. 1990: *In Their Own Voices*: 39.
