

Western Hegemony In Buchi Emecheta's Adah's Story.

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Abstract

The well-knit African culture has its pride and dignity. Buchi Emecheta a diasporic Nigerian writer portrays the struggle of African women who enters their dream world, Britain. The self-esteem native Africans is squashed by the cultural hegemony of the West. The western passive cultural leadership resort to silent acceptance of the Blacks. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity exposes the willing submission of Buchi Emecheta's Adah. .

Keywords: Hegemony, Hybridity, Passive submission, Silent acceptance, Cultural leadership...

Introduction

Africa's culture is an epitome of unity in diversity. The well-knit heterogeneous culture is handed over by the African elders to its youngsters through story telling or written form. The method of the youth inheriting culture from their elders is called enculturation. William Haviland et al. define the process in *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge* as "Enculturation . . . by which culture is passed from one generation to the next and through which individuals become a member of the society" (14). The cultural legacy the African people share is autonomous and regal.

Culture is dynamic like fluid. As fluid does not have a specific shape so is culture. Culture keeps on changing according to the need of time and place. The colonial phase of Africa from 1885-1960 is noted for the cultural shift among the Africans. The colonisers conditioned the colonised. In *On Imperialist Globalization* Fidel Castro points out that the colonisers used all its strength to keep away anything that stands against imperialism. He notes the culture of Africa stood with all might against the colonial encroachment. The Europeans had a structured plan of action to colonise the psychology of the Africans. The initial master plan is to construct a self-acknowledgement by the Africans that they were submissive objects.

Cultural hegemony is the primary component of the Europeans. The Europeans equalise themselves as superior beings and the Africans as inferior beings. The African culture was portrayed as barbaric. Hegemony is identified as cultural leadership by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. The Europeans holds the cultural authority. The crafty policy of the Europeans is to impose their cultural hierarchy in an unassertive passive slow manner. The Africans accepted the supremacy of the colonisers willingly.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony revolts against Marxism. He disagrees with Marxist aphorism that "every state is a dictatorship" (351) for it is a political error. Gramsci considers Marxism to be superfluous and orthodox. Dictatorship is not the only form of rule. Hegemony is a simple form of political leadership. Gramsci believes that the Marxist concept of "superstructure" (353) must be reassessed to deal with the factor of cultural hegemony. Gramsci breaks the superstructure power into two societies, the civil society and political society. The civil society forms the political and social consciousness of the society. The political society is the icon of the state. In the civil society the influence of the ruler is extended to the ruled to a certain extent by the intellectuals of the society. Benedetto Croce describes the intellectuals in *My Philosophy- And Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Time* to be "political genius" (239). According to Gramsci the intellectuals are inventors and initiators of ideologies. When the intellectuals fail to influence in the civil society the ruling class concentrates on the political society and gets the consensus of those who do not extend their consent. This is the time they resort to force to accept hegemony.

The civil society and the political society have their distinguishable way of approach. But they are not separate units. Both the structures share certain aspects. The civil society has its base on consent and the political society takes up a coercive role. The civil society and the political society aims to turn down the protest and the revolt of the subordinates and use intellectual and moral strategies as the society demands to repress the subordinates and establish hegemony. To create hegemony is a passive revolution. Nasrullah Mambrol in "Hegemony" postulates Gramsci's idea of hegemony,

Domination is thus exerted not by force, nor even necessarily by active persuasion, but by a more subtle and inclusive power over the economy, and over the state apparatuses such as education and the media, by which the ruling class's interest is presented as the common interest and thus comes to be taken for granted. (n. pag.) The ruling class takes the disguise of benevolence, good will and takes control of the subordinates with an amicable approach. The change in ideology seems to be natural process and a voluntary acceptance of the ruling class rather than an enforced violent one. Hegemony is the willing submission to the ruling class. It is a rule by sanction, approval and acceptance.

Gramsci advises against forced military exploits to instil the ruler's influence, for it would result to churn up a revolt rather than consent. Thomas R. Bates states that, "Rulers who can make millions of people do their bidding and make them do it without a lash, are competent rulers" (365). Mary R. Jackman an American sociologist too shares the same vein in *The Velvet Glove: Paternalism and Conflict in Gender, Class and Race Relations*, Dominants have the capacity to exact subordinates' compliance through treats and outright force . . . But those avenues of control are much more costly than the sweet approach, and they are likely to be considerably less lucrative. Hence such options are reserved as the last resort for troublesome individuals who have balked at social expectations or for moments of lapse in social arrangements when subordinates appear to be in need of a sharp reminder of the potency of the dominant group. Otherwise, the great potency lies discreetly and invisibly submerged beneath the social niceties that pervade everyday transactions. (362)

Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* a collection of essays published in 1994 pivots on the non existence of two separate entities. Bhabha's idea of hybridity is the central of the cultural studies. Rudyard Kipling is of the opinion that the East and the West are two separate entities. He represents the attitude of the West. The West considers itself and the East as two separate entities. Kipling's opening lines in "The Ballad of East and West", "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (1) proves that East and the West are threads which cannot be united. The West identifies its self identity to be separate, unique and rational.

Homi K. Bhabha established the concept of hybridity. Bill Ashcroft et al. in the *Post Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* regards Bhabha's hybridity as, "One of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in post-colonial theory, hybridity commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. Hybridization takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial, etc" (108). The theory of 'hybridity' is connected with mimicry the act of imitation. The elite West wants the uncivilised colonizer to copy their language, behaviour, dress and cultural demeanor. The West believed it as a way of civilising the colonizer. The imitation of Western culture leads the natives to suppress their aboriginal cultural identity. The colonizer expects the colonizer to be like him but not an exact replica of him. The Europeans forced the colonizer to assimilate with the European culture, but did not want to bridge the binary of superiority and inferiority completely.

Buchi Emecheta a Diasporic writer respects and is proud of the African traditional values. She believes and credits the indigenous culture. She rejects the rigidity of the imported cultural values when it takes self-esteem and identity of the natives to stake.

The major struggle Buchi Emecheta faces in England is her nationality as an African in a predominantly white community. This is reviewed in *Adah's Story*. Adah's passion for her own African society is revived. In England a sense of insecurity and uncertainty haunts her. She finds life in England tough. As a single mother she faces various humiliations and troubles in a White man's society. She is afraid and sandwiched between poverty and helplessness. She cries out in misery and sense of displacement "It is a curse to be an orphan, a double curse to be a black one in a white country, an unforgivable calamity to be a woman with five kids but without a husband. Her whole life had been like that of a perpetually unlucky gambler" (71).

Adah an educated black woman leads a decent middle class working woman's life in Africa. As an immigrant in London city her economic status is pulled down. She faces degrading experiences in London. She is forced by situation to take up her residence in the Pussy Cat Mansion. The Pussy Cat Mansion is an image of discriminatory system rooted in the West. The White's practice of racial discrimination is replicated in the Pussy Cat Mansion. It is the metaphor of the ditch where Adah moves. It is the place where Adah is created as the 'Other'. It wounds Adah's dignity.

The mansion is a site for families below the poverty line. Government agencies are responsible for the welfare of the ditch dwellers. The needs of the dwellers are satisfied with contempt. The Pussy Cat Mansion is built over a cemetery. Adah compares the building to the prison she has seen in movies where the doors and the windows are small, it is stinking and the grey colour of the flats reflects the sympathetic dark atmosphere the ditch dwellers are

force to live. The dismal scenario and the dingy and drab picture of the mansion described by Adah can be contrasted to the White man's town which Fanon documents in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He portrays the town of the West "is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage can be swallow all the leavings" (38-39). The English men are well-fed.

Adah's life in the mansion is filled with sorrow and endless bitterness. She finds it difficult to keep her children quiet, continue her education and job. To keep the residents in a state of dependency is the aim of the government agencies. The residents are tagged as "problem families" (17). They are not allowed to be employed or educated. They are encouraged by social officers to depend on the dole for their survival. The cultural and economic environment ruthlessly exploits their independency. The residents are poor and humble. They are kept at the mercy of the welfare officers. They are consigned to be at the receiving end.

Emecheta uses the actions of Carol, the social officer to be similar to the crafty plans of the west. She keep all the dwellers in the state of dependency pretending to be genuine and one among them. She develops the attitude that they belong to the classless section. She expects the dwellers to be grateful for the free food and clothes from the clothes exchange she arranges for. She does not encourage them to work for their food rather promotes them to depend on the dole for their necessity. Adah realizes Carol gives them their rights as if in an act of charity. An old man presses on the point to Adah, "Your friend (Carol) calls yours a problem family because of your, your - you know, your skin" (99). Fanon's, *Black Skin, White Mask* marks this act as epidermidization, where skin colour becomes one's identity. The whites internalise inferiority complex and Adah's epidermal identity pushes her to the ditch to accept inferior status.

Adah resigns her job in the civil service and closes her middle class working woman chapter. She is jobless and qualifies herself as a complete problem family to receive assistance from the dole. Adah confronts with racial incidents in the mansion. She receives harsh complaints from the Smalls, her neighbours about her noisy children. Mr. Small hysterically and irrelevantly mentions her colour- black while complaining. He reminds Adah "A black person must always have a place, a white person already had one by birth right" (18). Adah feels inferior and rootless. To defend her, Adah accepts the role of an ignorant, the dominant English society expects of a Black. She pretends to submit herself to the stereotype image of a black woman to secure friendship in England rather than end up in a quarrel. Ziauddin Sardar in the foreword of *Black Skin, White Mask*, elaborates the ignorant position of a black in the white man's world,

When the black man comes into contact with the white world he goes through an experience of sensitization. His ego collapses. His self-esteem evaporates. He ceases to be self-motivated person. The entire purpose of his behaviour is to emulate the white man, to be like him, thus to be accepted as a man. (xiii)

Adah receives cynical remarks for her manner of lighting the coalite to heat her room. The Smalls do not give her time to explain her situation before passing their judgement. She is born and brought up in the tropics where the average temperature did not demand her to light a coalite for heat. The Smalls share their resentment feeling and mockingly regard her as an illiterate.

An incident that angers Adah is her encounter with a White old lady near the mansion. The old lady is not willing to share the washing machine meant for three to use with Adah because she is a Black. The white lady's mind is predominated with the perception that the Whites are pure and the Blacks are impure. It is evident the dichotomous style of pure and impure which Homi Bhabha and Edward Said puts forward in *The Location of Culture* and *The Wretched of the Earth* respectively is created by the Whites. The white lady considers her to be uncivilised. To support this view Aimé Césaire states in *Discourse on Colonialism* that, "The idea of barbaric Negro is a European invention" (53). The old lady spits and shrieks at Adah, "Why don't you go back to your bleeding country?" (110). The old lady's daughter comments on the African's dressing style hinting the Black are backward in their views, "Shut up, you black savage, you never even wear pants in your own country" (110). Adah is fed up with such semi-human treatment.

Adah in her childhood days regards the United Kingdom to be heaven and life there as the gateway to prosperity. When she joins Francis in London she realises the United Kingdom is a hostile world of racial discrimination. Through her personal experiences her idea that the United Kingdom is heaven transforms to a God forsaken country. The Blacks willingly submit to the colour prejudice. The accommodation Francis secures for his family in the White man's land drives Adah crazy. Adah's house in Nigeria is spacious with verandas and backyards where children would play and elders would have a chit chat. In London, Francis picks up a small room as their house in a dingy quarter meant for the Blacks. She learns that they did not have basic facilities like a separate kitchen or a bath and the toilet is outside.

Francis is accustomed to such discrimination. He accepts the superiority of the white which Fanon rightly points out that, "the feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority" (69). He reminds Adah her status as a second class citizen in United Kingdom. She is no longer elite from Nigeria and wants her to adapt to this life style. He tells her:

Well, I know you will not like it, but this is the best I can do. You see accommodation is very short in London, especially for black people with children. Everybody is coming to London. The West Indians, the Pakistanis and

even the Indians, so that African students are usually grouped together with them. We are all blacks, all coloureds, and the only houses we can get are horrors like these. (38)

Adah's constant worry is her living condition in one half rooms. In a year, Adah has to look for another accommodation for her landlord wants her to vacate. House -hunting becomes difficult for her because all the houses had the notice "Sorry, no coloured" (70). Her stay in England has conditioned her to accept inferior things. In Nigeria she would accept nothing but the best. In United Kingdom she was continuously reminded as a second class citizen. She did not seek for an accommodation in a clean, desirable neighbourhood. She was ready to accept accommodation anywhere. She did not mind her accommodation in the midst of ruins and demolitions.

An episode where Adah speaks over the phone to the landlady reminds the poem "Telephonic Conversation" written by Wole Soyinka which highlights the impact of racial discrimination. The tenant is rejected accommodation because of his self confession, "Madam, . . . I am African" (4-5). Adah too faces the same plight because she is a black tenant. She knew that any white would distinguish an African accent so she practices her voice in low to mislead the landlady that she is a White. As expected, in a face to face meeting with the landlady she is denied shelter because she is a black.

Francis accepts the psychological reservation the White imposes on the Black. He does not have the courage to take her to a restaurant to eat. He firmly believes such places are only meant for the Whites. Adah is aware that "his (Francis) blackness, his feeling of blackness, was firmly established in his mind" (58). Coloured Adah would feast only with her eyes on the well displayed food like a "starving dog" (58).

In England Adah learns she is supposed to be ashamed of her colour. Anything beautiful and pure is meant for the Whites and not for the Blacks. Ziauddin Sardar in preface of *Black Skin, White Mask* shares his view that, "whiteness, Fanon asserts, has become a symbol of Purity, of Justice, Truth, Virginity. It defines what it means to be civilized, modern and human . . . Blackness represents the diametrical opposite in collective unconsciousness, it stands for ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality" (xiii). This has an impact on Adah's psychology. Whenever she goes to the clothes store, she is afraid of what the white assistant would say, she would automatically pick up sub-standard clothes from counters that carry discarded and soiled clothes. Buchi Emecheta pens the cultural conflict Adah faces in a White man's land.

The African traditional doctrine advocates equality among its civilians a reverse of the western idea of racial discrimination as their means to establish dominance. Julia Sloth-Nielsen in, "A Dutiful Child: The Implication of Article 31 of the African Children's Charter" demonstrates the practice of equality among the native, "every individual shall have the duty to respect and consider his fellow beings without discrimination, and to maintain relations aimed at promoting, safeguarding and reinforcing mutual respect and tolerance" (166). On the other hand Dinesh D'Souza in "Is Racism a Western Idea?" proposes the embryonic idea of racism takes its birth in the west. He states that, "racism is a peculiar feature of the Euro-American mind, and its roots go back to the origin of Western civilization" (518).

Emecheta's fiction wavers between the notion home and search for identity in an alien land. Her protagonists are suppressed and they passively accept the superiority of the west. They oscillate between native culture and the imposed European culture. A transcultural identity is obvious among her characters. A sense of displacement hovers in Adah. The west demands respect among the African and treat them as invisible beings. The colonial culture supersedes the indigenous traditions of the Blacks..

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