

The Nigerian Novelist, Buchi Emecheta

Mother, tell me a story

Helen Fallon

"All I ever wanted was to tell stories from my home, just like my big mother, Nwakwaluzo, used to tell her stories in her own compound."

Buchi Emecheta, *Head Above Water*.

Florence Onyebuchi Emecheta was born in Yaba, Lagos, in 1944. Her name Onyebuchi, which was shortened to Buchi, means, "Are you my God?" While her grandparents and ancestors would have worshipped traditional gods, Emecheta's parents were Protestants. They had come to the city of Lagos to find work. During holidays Buchi travelled back to their hometown of Ibuza in Eastern Nigeria to help on the farm and to learn the stories and ways of her people.

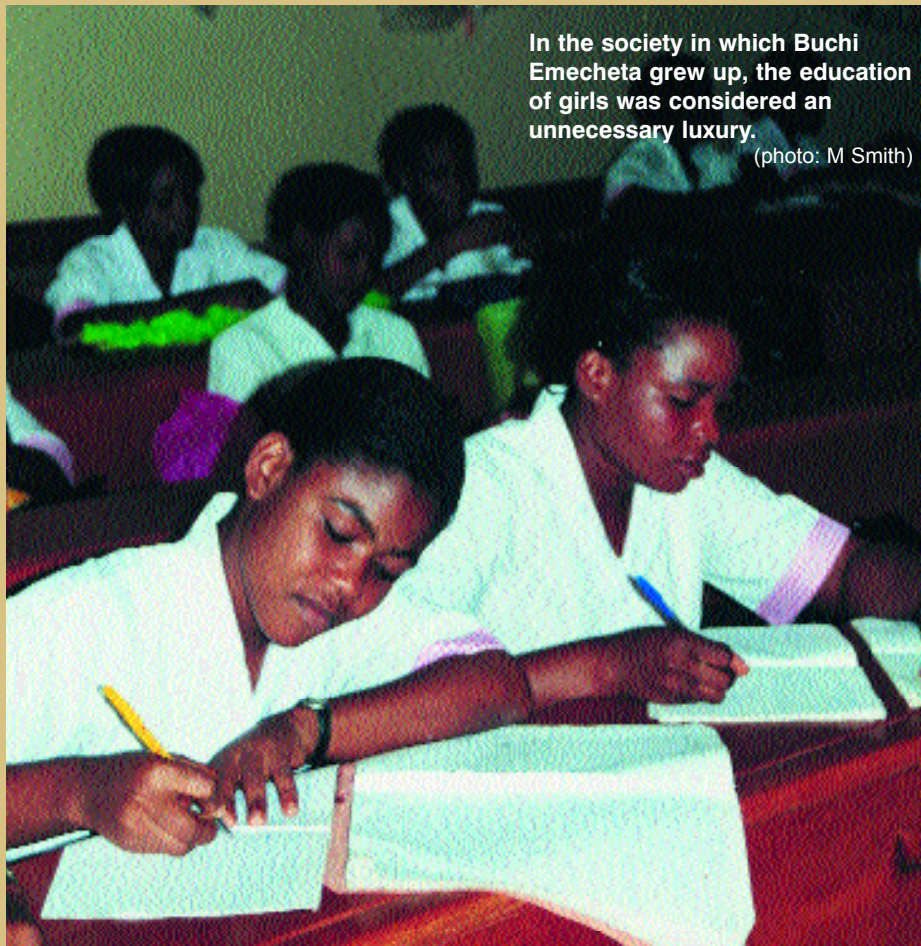
Unwritten stories, prayers, lullabies, proverbs, riddles and songs - often told by elderly women - were the means of passing on the wisdom and traditions of her Igbo people. In Emecheta's family, her father's oldest sister - her big mother - assumed the role of storyteller. "She was very old and almost blind," Buchi recalled in an interview. "I thought to myself no life could be more important than this. So when people asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I told them I wanted to be a storyteller."

BREAKING BARRIERS

The education of boys was valued by the Igbo people. However, education for girls was considered an unnecessary luxury; except perhaps to increase the amount of the bride price that could be negotiated on marriage. While her

brother Adolphus went to school Buchi remained at home until, bored one day, and knowing her mother was occupied getting her hair styled, she slipped out of their house and made her way to the Methodist School, where a neighbour Mr Cole taught. Seeing their daughter's determination to get an education, her parents allowed her to go to school. She learned English and for the first time read instead of listened to a story. It was Hansel and Gretel.

Buchi's father, a railway worker, died suddenly when



In the society in which Buchi Emecheta grew up, the education of girls was considered an unnecessary luxury.

(photo: M Smith)

she was nine. This had a devastating effect on the family. In keeping with local tradition her dead husband's brother inherited her mother. Buchi was sent to live with her mother's cousin in Lagos, while Adolphus was sent to their father's brother in another part of the city.

Treated as a family servant, she fought to sit a scholarship examination for the Methodist Girls' High School. Successful, she began and completed secondary school education. While she dreamed of continuing her education, few Nigerian women, at that time, went to university. Marriage was considered more important and, on leaving school, Buchi married. Working in the library at the American Embassy, she still cherished her dream of further study as she began to bring up her children.

In 1961 Emecheta's husband Sylvester went to London to study accountancy. She followed him a year later and was shocked to find that advertisements for accommodation carried the words in bold red letters 'SORRY NO COLOUREDS.' Combining motherhood with work in a public library, she began to write about her experience of being an emigrant in England.

NOT EASY BEING A WOMAN.

Her first book *In the Ditch*, (1972) describes the many difficulties she encountered. By 1965 she was the mother of five children, living in poverty and now separated from her husband. *Second-Class Citizen*, published two years later, tells the story of her life in Nigeria and her early years in London.

Much of Emecheta's writing deals with issues central to women's place in Nigerian society. *The Slave Girl* (1977) tells the story of an Igbo girl who is sold into slavery, by a cruel brother, to a rich African market woman, at the beginning of the 20th century.

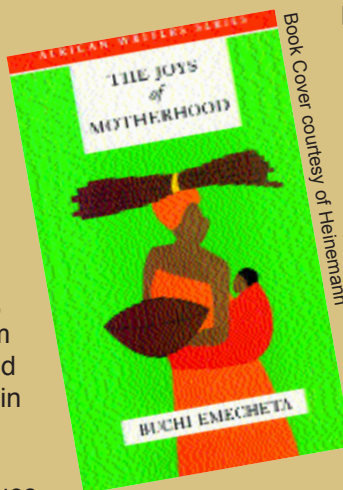
In *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) Nnu Ego, returns to her family home in shame when she fails to become pregnant as a new bride. Her father sends her to Lagos to marry another man who does laundry for a white family.

Though she despises her new husband, she believes that if she can have a child she will have fulfillment and security in her old age. Eventually she becomes the mother of eight children. When her husband inherits



Buchi Emecheta: The principal characters in her novels explore what it means to be a woman and a mother in Nigerian society.
(photo courtesy Harcourt Press)

his late brother's three wives, he brings one of them to share the house in Lagos. While polygamy can work in rural societies, where each wife can have their own household, it does not sit well in this new urban environment. Nnu Ego strives to educate her sons but they, once well educated, emigrate. She dies by the roadside. "She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her" the novel concludes.



SHAPING STORIES

Buchi Emecheta still lives in North London and continues to write. She is now probably Africa's most prolific female black writer. Sadly one of her five children, her daughter Chieudu, died, aged twenty-three, from anorexia in 1984, while a university student in Edinburgh.

When asked, in an interview about the source of her energy and inspiration she responded: "Whenever I am going to do a chapter I commit it to God. I say 'God, this idea has come to me, help me to treat it responsibly'... I just take a day at a time. I say to myself, I am going to do this today. After I have done it, I am free."

Talking of her career as a writer Emecheta remarked: "I am simply doing what my big mother was doing... The only difference is that she told her stories in the moonlight, while I have to bang away at a typewriter I picked up from Woolworths in London." ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.
She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone.