

## Buchi Emecheta's Gwendolen and M.K. Indira's Gajje Pooje: Women and Societies in Polarities

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### Abstract

This article is an attempt to explicate the societies that two women characters in Buch Emecheta's *Gwendolen* and M.K.Indira's *Gajje Pooje* exist. The authors' delineation of flexibility or openness of the societies in the novels is also provided. In addition, the societal polarities and their impact on Gwendolen and Chandra are explored. Gendered oppressive practices such as prostitution and sexual abuse are examined and analyzed. The findings indicate that women are demoralized due to (a) sociological pressures and (b) biological determinism.

**Keywords:** Characterization, flexible, gendered oppression, society, women

Literary work reflects the social context and the culture of the time period. There are interrelationships between all spheres of human activities (e.g., wedding, funeral, and communal events) in a literary work. Literature and society can obviously be put in different terms: those of symbolic or meaningful relations, of consistency, harmony, coherence, congruence, structural identity, stylistic analogy or with whatever term we want to designate the integration of a culture and the interrelationship among the different activities of people (Lynch & Warner, 1996).

A woman who writes of females' experiences often brings in some aspects of those encounters that have angered her or provoked her strong feelings. Any woman who writes fiction shows the world as it looks to her protagonist; if the character is a woman, she reveals to the world as it appears to a female. According to Ezewanebe (2000), "[African novels] contain more than enough illustrations to make one angry at the way women are subordinated, oppressed and marginalized in the Igbo society" (p. 350).

Most of the Kannada fiction does not go beyond domestic narrative. They usually deal with sentimental love-attains and problems in marriage. Women writers who come from middle class families do not seem to have an idea of a woman's destiny apart from the institution of marriage and childbearing. The portrayal of society is not a complete one either. They seem to choose a small section of society and through the protagonist paint a picture of that society that women live, negotiate their sexuality, and struggle to belong. The two novels chosen here for analysis with regard to women and the societal polarities are, Buchi Emecheta's *Gwendolyn* (also published as *Family*) and M. K. Indira's *Gajje Pooje*.

African women suffered several setbacks, both through traditional sexist culture and through western colonialism which offered education to men rather than women. In addition, we find fewer African women writers than male writers and we tend to rely on the interpretations

offered by men to understand the lives of people in the African society (Mugambi & Allan, 2010; Sarr, 1998). The novels of Buchi Emecheta, an Igbo woman writer, explore the varying definitions of womanhood and motherhood as experienced by her female protagonists in the Nigerian society.

*Gwendolyn* by Buchi Emecheta explores the trials and tribulations of womanhood and motherhood, through the tale of a young Jamaican girl Gwen (Gwendolyn). Her harsh childhood days in rural Jamaica and her alienation later in England, are the themes of the novel. *Gejje Pooje* by M.K. Indira explores the trauma of a young girl, who is the daughter of a prostitute. The novel revolves around how Chandra, the protagonist, retains her chastity against all odds in a male dominated society. In the novel, oppressive forces revolve around the women.

A close reading of these novels reveals that women are exploited and how mistreatment is sociological, biological, and psychological. The degree of exploitation depends on how flexible the society is and both these women face constraints in their communities. Barfi, Kahzadi, and Azizmohammadi (2015) posit,

“Female figures are multiply victimized by oppressive forces of race, gender and class, though one cannot refer to them as a homogeneous group (p. 26).

*Gajje Pooje* is a novel contextualized to the Indian milieu. It is a story of a prostitute and the hegemonic system, a kind of class/caste/gender oppression and sexual exploitation of women. M. K. Indira’s purpose is not just primarily to show the system as a living structure, but within this framework is contained the sphere of action, which involves the personal trauma of the victim, Chandra. She encounters glaring contradiction between herself and other women in her society and she feels alienated, ostracized, bullied, and dehumanized:

You and marriage, who will marry you? You are a whore, aren’t you? Who will get you married? (p. 33).

Chandra was too confused and shocked to say anything to such denigrating comments. She can’t exhibit indignation given her vulnerability because she is already victimized as a person outside the civil society.

*Gwendolyn*, on the other hand, is about womanhood. Gwen’s fundamental purpose is to flower into motherhood as rooted in the paradoxical relationship and both traditional structures and urbanization. Gwen unlike Chandra does not encounter external influences, but experiences pain as she is sexually abused both by her father and a neighbour at a very young age:

Your mammy gone ne England to join your Daddy. Dem no want you dare, but me look after you, right? Ma help your granny on de farm and buy you tings, right? We one family nuh. This is our secret, right? Don’t tell nobody because they’ll say you’re bad gal. You’ll do anything for your uncle Johnny, not so. Juney-Juney? And if you wan’ anything, anything at all, just tell me. We good friends now, good, good friends (page. 22).

Gwen’s uncle is an opportunist and he manipulates Gwendolyn’s mind by coercing her to comply with his sexual needs.

The society Chandra lives in is inflexible, compels her to the social code to an extent that in fact transforms a value into weakness. Chandra does not exploit her situation but consciously thrives hard to get away from the clutches of the evil practice that vilifies women and soils their soul. Whatever little pleasure she enjoys in life is unfortunately vicarious:

May what come, I must show this world that I am not a whore. I will get married to prove this (p. 58).

When Somu rejects her based on suspicion, Chandra declares,:

Somu, our Singavva has arranged for all that...I will not agree to all that [the ritual]. Now after touching you, if I agree to all that, I become whore's daughter too. Wait and see for yourself who this Chandra of yours is? (p. 128).

Gwendolen, however, cannot act against what was happening to her life. She remains confined in her action that is to be distinguished from her thoughts, especially within the gender oppressive structures. She is forced to promiscuous experiences, that she is unable to share with others:

She was a wicked girl, he had said so himself. Uncle Johnny had messed her up: a fact she thought she was going to keep from her parents for ever, since it would cause them pain. Now that her father had known and had condemned her, he had become somebody else too. And for somebody else, she had to lie very still because she had no solid and protective daddy to shield her any more. Also, no one was going to know about it. Oh, what was her mother doing in Jamaica all this time anyhow? (p. 146).

Societies that frame life experiences such as menstruation, copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause as constraining and traumatic (i.e. causing physical and mental turmoil and in some cases, ridicule), indicates the traditional burden that is enforced on women. These female experiences in societies such as Asian Indian and African are portrayed as shameful in these two novels.

Both Gwendolyn and Chandra have physical needs and they both enjoy the companionship of Emmanuel and Somanath respectively:

[Gwendolyn] jolted herself back to reality when she saw Immanuel peering at her. Tears were running from her eyes now...please don't cry, Gwendolyn. I didn't mean to...well, next time I'll buy condom. I didn't know the evening would end like this. Honest, Gwen, I didn't mean to...(p. 155).

Gwendolyn was touched at the sensitivity Emmanuel had projected. It was the first time in her life that she was treated like a human being and not a sexual object.

She put her fingers over his lips. So many things you no understand, white boy (p. 156).

Chandra aspires to fulfill her sexual needs through the institution of marriage. Chandra was ecstatic when Somu held her very close to his body, he was not aware of her hands in his. She is not bothered about her plight either

...Though they could not see each others face in the dark, they remained close to each other for ten minutes (p. 111).

It is true that M.K.Indira presents the society as one that also has positive qualities of its own.

The coherence and order that makes social life viable and charming in the intense warmth of personal relationships in social life is depicted through Somu's family dynamic. His family is representative of a typical middle class Indian family. Candra's is a section of society that is marginalized, oppressed, suppressed, and structured to exploit women's sexuality. The author questions the atrocity in the novel by commenting, the world is like that, forget it Chandra. This

is not just today's story. It is a social practice since ages. Women like Chandra are 'othered' and alienated because of a system that men have created for their own sexual gratification.

In *Gwendolyn*, Emecheta presents a society that does not consider Gwen's sexual experiences as promiscuous. Nobody blames her of misconduct though her neighbor, uncle Johnny, seduces her. Gwen also becomes pregnant by her father and that is okay with the family:

Come on, grandmother... they are the future now. We can't hold them back with our fears and prejudices...Don't worry, Gwen is a big girl now, she can take care of herself. She'll find her own identity (p. 238).

African society is not inflexible/closed and does not interfere with the individual lives and holds an affirmative vision (Killam, 2004).

Emmanuel unlike Somu is ready to accept Gwen even though Emmanuel does not really know who was the cause for Gwen's pregnancy. Somu misunderstands the embrace that he witnesses one night and he does not take the time to clarify. Even if he had tried to ascertain the man who hugged Chandra, she was not able to disclose the identity due to an imposed and unreasonable oath. Although Somu is convinced that Chandra is not a prostitute and she does not have the traits of one, he slips in a moment and doubts her and dismisses her chastity. He does not have the courage to take her hand in marriage even though he loves her whole-heartedly and regrets his refusal:

Suddenly he remembered Chandra. The very thought of her troubled her...What a fine girl? Or what help can I be to her? How else can I assist her? (p. 151).

Clearly, it is an instance of social status and stigma against Chandra's caste that interferes with the individual lives.

Moreover, Chandra lives in a closed system and a highly inflexible society, where familial/cultured men could not marry a prostitute's daughter. Chandra is also forced to resort to *geje pooje* because of Chandra's grandmother, who has evil intentions and is only invested in earning money for the family. The grandmother's apprehension was that Chandra would fall in love and possibly submit herself to somebody without demanding wealth in return. The grandmother was also against the institution of marriage or education for women: Granddaughter's success in the examination did not make Singavva happy:

...When does this your collegiate education get over dear? (p. 62).

On the other hand, Gwendolyn's grandmother is progressive and loving. When Gwen shares her agony about uncle Johnny troubling her during nights, her grandmother is furious with him:

She called all their neighbours and they marched to Johnny and really started a fight. Everybody came and shouted at him, calling him all kinds of names under the sun. Her Mammy's friend, Roza, suggested Uncle Johnny should be reported and sent to prison. 'You silly ol' man, troubling lill babies. Never seen such a ting. God damn you, you know'" (p. 33).

Nevertheless, there is a stark difference in how the grandmothers react to their granddaughters' sexualities. Chandra's takes advantage, while Gwen's is protective and sympathetic. Ultimately, for Chandra, family member becomes a hindrance to shy away from the clutches of prostitution. Gwen, on the other hand, was able to move on in life due to her grandmother's support.

## Conclusion

There seems to be an obvious parallel between the notions of class/caste oppression and suppression of women in Asian Indian and African societies. Emecheta and Indira have delineated the differences in *Gejje Pooje* and *Gwendolyn*. Consciousness of this coercion is a major source of revolutionary or reformist ideologies in modern societies. It is time one began to appreciate the fact that woman's biological make-up may well be her destiny. Women in fiction are drawn from women in real life. Exploitation of women is due to two reasons in these two novels-

- (1) Sociological pressures
- (2) Biological Determinism.

Feminist research is investigating exploitation and how women's bodies function

within the context to our lives and these authors argue that our biology develops in reciprocal and dialectical relationship with the ways in which we live. Gwendolyn's manipulation is not sociological, but biological. Chandra's humiliation is both sociological and biological; it is double fold and Chandra could not escape one or the other. Sociobiology in particular is established construct by feminist theorist and this theory disparages social origins of women and emphasizes her biology Ezewanebe (2000).

Gwendolyn's society is not inflexible/closed. She is not saddled with guilt though she undergoes painful experiences. She ultimately emancipates, forgets the past, and evolves as a "new woman"; therefore, she does not succumb to circumstances. Gwendolyn does not become a powerless victim like Chandra whose ultimate disillusionment is Somu's rejection. Gwendolyn, unlike Chandra does not resort to suicide.

## Implications

The following two questions need our attention and we need to be cognizant of how society impacts women's lives:

- (1) Is Indian society really that inflexible/closed that Chandra had to think of suicide or is it authorial? Was Somanath like other men in Chandra's society that did not accept a prostitute's daughter as a wife?
- (2) Is African society that flexible/open that the woman is not influenced by it and a sense of guilty does not operate in Gwendolyn? Was it Emmanuel's open mindedness that liberated Gwendolyn?
- (3) Is exploitation of women only due to sociological pressure or is it because of biological determinism?

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