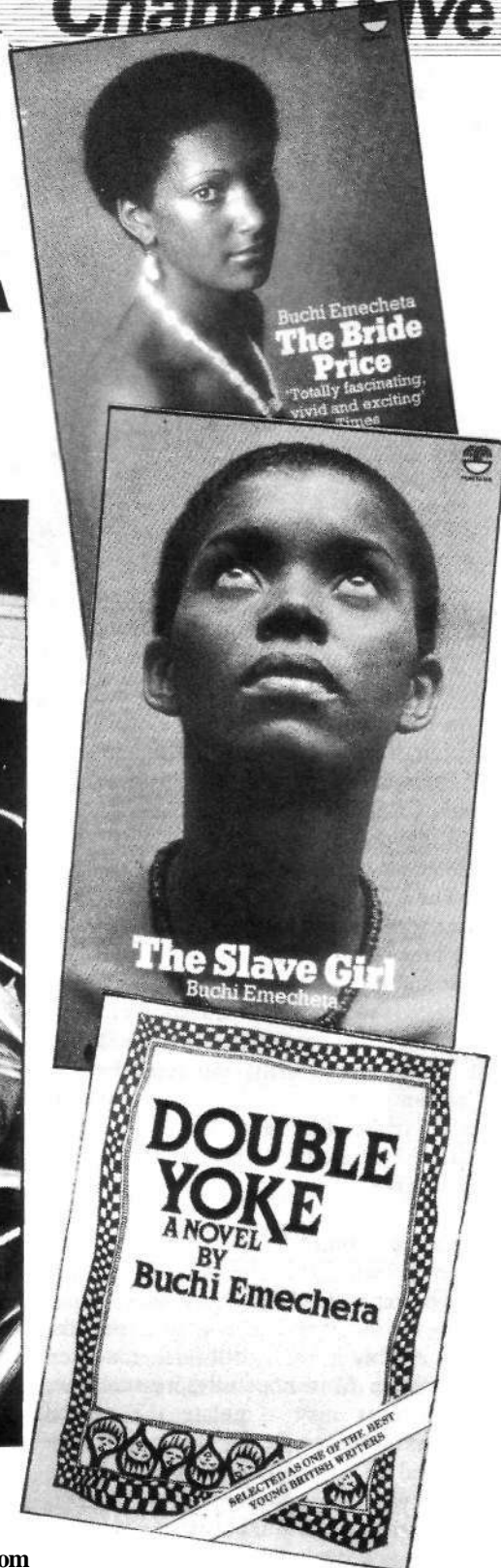


Interview with BUCHI EMECHETA



Buchi Emecheta came to England from Lagos, Nigeria in 1962. She has written plays for radio and television but is best known for her novels *In the Ditch* (which will be serialised soon on television), *Second Class Citizen*, *The Bride Price*, *Destination Biafra* and her most recent *Double Yolk*. A single parent and mother of five, she was selected as one of this year's Best Young British Writers. Here she talks to Jane Bryce.



Can you tell us a little bit about your early experiences of England?

When I came to England it wasn't what it is now, then the black people were very rarely strong. I had a personal shock because England wasn't what I expected it to be. . . where people lived like Jane Austen. I think I found the nearest picture to that I had in *Brideshead Revisited* — those ladies

going about in white dresses. I thought England was all like that. So I was surprised when I came. I arrived in Liverpool on a grey morning and I suppose the shock of housing and of people not being very friendly was my first impression.

When you came to England you intended writing romantic novels. What changed your mind?

I married straight out of school, it was a Romeo and Juliet sort of life, and when I came here I was faced with the harsh life of an adult: looking for housing, looking after children, looking for a house, a place to live, keeping your husband happy. These are not subjects for romance.

So you took the reality of your own life and that gave you the material for your novels? What then started you off writing the historical novels, the three African novels — *The Bride Price*, *Slave Girl*, *Joys of Motherhood*?

I wanted to go back to Nigeria in my books. What I do is take a universal concept which I know is applicable to everybody — but to use an African background — the aim is to bring out the way that people live in Africa. It may not be relevant to the story but again that is the fiction content; you just work everything in. Sometimes it looks as if the whole story was actually set in Africa but it was not. My book *Wrestling Match* is a good example. I was telling a school yesterday that the book was based on the Falklands War. They couldn't see it but by the end they understood the concept that in a good war nobody wins. I used two boys wrestling and it was a good fight, but by the end of it, they were both hurt and humiliated. I got that idea by watching television coverage of the Falklands War. We lost about 250 boys here, and I don't know how many the Argentinians lost, over 600. And at the end of it, the Falklands are still there, and can we look after them? So in a good war nobody wins.

You say 'we' so do you now identify yourself as being British?

Yes, because when the war was going on my son was ready to go and fight for Britain. He said he felt he had to defend Britain and that shocked me. He kept saying 'we, we, we' so maybe it's slipped into my vocabulary too. Recently, my publisher telephoned and said 'Buchi, do you have a

British passport and are you still under 40?' I said 'Yes' and he replied 'Oh, you are in'. 'In what?' I asked. 'One of the Best Young British Writers.' Luckily I have my passport otherwise I wouldn't have been eligible. I have been the Best Young British for the past eight weeks now.

You returned to Nigeria recently — why did you find it so difficult to stay there?

There were two particular difficulties. The first one was communication and the second was being a woman. In Nigeria, at the moment, they are not able to cope with a woman like me. I was a threat to a lot of women and to a lot of men. The women cannot forgive me if I remain single and also have a family. But I have a family as well and am raising them. A lot of women only stay in their marriages because of the children so seeing me on my own annoys them.

Do you see yourself as a feminist and how do you think feminism relates to women in Nigeria?

I'm not just a feminist — I'm a feminist plus. I believe in the concept of feminism, but ours is a problem more than feminism so that is why it is so difficult to identify 100%. When I returned to Africa it was impossible for me to go to my own people in the village, even though I had left my husband 16 years earlier I still had to go to his people. This is a problem that the Western feminists will never understand and the way I behave will affect my children's ownership of land. There you have to wait a day before you get a pail of clean water. Women should not be suppressed because they are women, because they have children and because of men. Then I am a feminist. But when it comes to the African concept, for the moment, I say 'feminist plus'. We have so many other problems.

Your recent novel Double Yolk centres around a young female student who uses her sexuality to achieve academically. How has this been received in Nigeria?

It's only just come out and the earliest reaction I've heard was when the Dean of the Faculty in Calabar said he'd just finished reading the book and they have recommended it for the next semester. So he didn't say whether he liked it but he said we are very sorry that your stay in Nigeria

was so short but if we had known that you were going to produce a book like this and *Naira Power* then the time had not been wasted. So he probably liked it but he didn't say. He is a very westernised professor dealing all his life with America and he's married to an American lady so probably that's why. But I haven't had reaction from the ordinary students yet.

How do you think young Nigerian women will react to Double Yolk?

Feminists here have attacked me for allowing the girl to use her sexuality to get what she wanted. That's why I say I think we are in a way beyond feminism because this girl's pushed into a corner, and that was the only way she could get what she wanted. Her family would never understand if she came back and said 'I didn't get the academic qualifications because the professor wanted me to have sex with him and I refused'. They would never understand that. All they wanted was for her to get the education at *all* cost, they didn't want to know how she did it. A lot of money and time and emotion had been invested in her education — she just had to get that qualification at all cost and that education will give her the opportunity to get a good job. Then she would be able to help the family. Then she can afford to be a feminist. Until then she had to depend on someone — that is the only way those girls can survive. I'm sure a lot of young girls are saying that Calabar is nothing, it's worse in Lagos, which is a bigger university and even more competitive. But it's common all over Nigeria. What I'm trying to say is that men blackmailing you as a woman leads you to trivialise sex and say 'it's not important, what is important is myself as a person, no one owns me because of sex.' So, in *Double Yolk* when people say she shouldn't have had sex with the professor, they don't understand that that is the only way she could survive. In the end it did disturb her because she met other women and she realised that it was stupid hiding her feelings in the first place anyway. She should have discussed them — that would have given her more strength.

You set up your own printing press, Ouguwu Afor, for Double Yolk, could you tell us what made you do this and what the objective is?

It's nice that since the Best of British I've sold 9000 copies in a month in paperback, but that is not really me. You know the

James Bond thing — they wanted to get a commission quickly for a film so they cut down on time between the books. Somehow I don't like the chocolatey film-star covers they give a lot of my paperbacks and on top of that I don't like the print. Some of the printing is very squashed in order to save money so that each book when it is produced costs about 27p and can sell for £2.95. All this made me fed up.

Luckily last year I was commissioned to do two books, *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch* for television. They paid me quite a lot of money and I used it to start the press. So far I have spent £10,500 but with that I printed 10,000 paperbacks and 2,000 hardbacks. I've recouped my money already. Ouguwu Afor is based partly in Nigeria and this has helped extend my audience. People are now beginning to identify the name of the publishing house as a Nigerian name and I have a Nigerian distributor which will help a lot. It's mostly ghetto publishing in Nigeria, badly presented because it's for a Nigerian audience so anything second rate will do. It's interesting that when my paperback came out one critic said this is not a working class book it's middle class because of the cover. I said 'but do you think this audience should have second best?' This was one of the problems — it was expensive because I didn't print too many copies but it has better artwork and print than usual. When you've got capital here you can sell more cheaply in Nigeria and, of course, you can sell the same type of print to other countries. In fact I completed an American contract this morning and I want exactly the same print and cover for this edition.

Is it true that you are writing your autobiography at the moment?

Yes, but I stopped that to finish another contemporary story — *The Rape Of Shabi*. I just invented this country, a modern nation south of the Sahara which is raped for its oil and then later told that the oil is no longer profitable. By this time people are starving because they've lost the art of cultivating the land. This is something I have thought is true of many Third World countries. My autobiography, *Head Above Water*, has incorporated bits from my first novels which never came out. But the early part will be lightly sketched because I've done it already in my books. The rest of my life since then, is different — because as a writer you become accepted as almost white.