

BUCHI EMECHETA AND RUBY SLIPPERJACK:  
WRITING IN THE MARGINS TO CREATE HOME

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**Buchi Emecheta and Ruby Slipperjack:  
Writing in the Margins to Create Home**

by

Grace Bavington

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

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## Abstract

Ojibway writer Ruby Slipperjack and Ibo writer Buchi Emecheta are both marginalized writers crafting autobiographical fiction while living in exile from their homes of origin. This thesis discusses their individual works as well as some of the new insights and alternative critical approaches such works open up for readers and critics. One chapter is devoted to the issues of language and the ways in which Slipperjack and Emecheta represent their linguistic/cultural backgrounds in their stories written in English.

This is a comparative study in the sense of reading disparate traditions in juxtaposition while avoiding a synthesis of them or the reduction of the two traditions into mainstream literature. The literature of Slipperjack and Emecheta is appreciated within the cultural and historical context in which each is written recognizing the limitations of reading and theorizing from outside of the cultural matrix of the authors.

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First my family: Bill Bavington, my spouse, has been most supportive through the long haul. While I beavered away at this thesis my son seemingly flew through his Honours and Masters theses. I benefitted from both the model of the energetic scholar and from sharing ideas over phone lines, email and in person with him. My daughter, the reader of the family, completed the works of Slipperjack and Emecheta ahead of me and offered brief but insightful critiques which I later discovered to be accurate to an uncanny degree for such a young person. Thanks to all three of you for enduring inconvenience without complaint and most of all for your sustenance.

Roberta Buchanan has been my advisor from the start. A true teacher, she allowed me the frightening and rare experience of freedom and space to think, offering judicious guidance at just the perfect moments and demanding rigour at all times.

It was quiet direction from Dr. Buchanan that resulted in my brief but exceptionally important meeting with Robin McGrath. Dr. McGrath, with no obligation to do so, shared some of her expertise in Native writing and introduced me to the writing of Ruby Slipperjack.

I have been privileged to cross paths with other literary academics: Dr. Kanchana

Ugbabe, a writer and literary scholar at the University of Jos, Nigeria, tirelessly promotes African women writers and it was from her I first heard the name of Buchi Emecheta. Similarly Zainab Haruna working in Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland responded to my many questions about women's writing in Africa from her strong scholarly base in this area. At UniJos Professor Ngwaba welcomed me as an audit student to his classes on the African novel. Buchi Njere, himself a writer and student of English at UniJos, inspired me by his love of the subject and lively discussions to resume my literary studies when I returned to Canada.

Ruby Slipperjack kindly responded to my letter. She also referred me to Dan Rice, a graduate student at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, who shared information with me from his thesis in progress on Slipperjack's work. My research into Native literature was also assisted by Gloria Reinbergs, a friend and librarian for Native collections at Spadina Road Public Library; Valerie Legge, Memorial University of Newfoundland; Shirley Williams, Trent University; writer, friend and inspiration, Camille Fouillard.

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Two colleagues, Dr. Maureen Laryea and Kathryn Hustins, in the School of Nursing, Memorial University of Newfoundland, particularly encouraged my research in literature, wisely seeing that the gap between my professional concerns in nursing and the literary narratives that tell so much about life is not so large after all.

The overall kindness and encouragement of friends must not be omitted: Marcel Cote, the Barnable family, Maryam Murat-Khan, Achilla Isaah, Kenna Owoh, Sharon Buehler, and Donna

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Women have a history of reading and writing in the interstices of the masculine culture, moving between use of the dominant language or form of expression and specific versions of experience based on their marginality.... This location has the potential to lock the subject away in isolation and despair as well as the potential for critical innovation and particular strengths.

Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorialization" 357

[M]y hope for us all—that not only will the nuclear war be a non-starter, but that the white European woman from the North will regard the black woman from the South as her sister and that both of us together will hold hands and try to salvage what is left of our world from the mess the sons we have brought into it have made.

Buchi Emecheta, *Head Above Water* 1

We have always walked on the edge  
of your dreams, stalked  
you as you made wild your way  
through this land,  
generation after generation  
And, O Canada, you have always been  
Afraid of us, scared, because you know  
you can never live without us

Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, "Oh Canada (Bear v)" 69-70

## Chapter One

### Issues in Approaching Marginalized Literatures in Juxtaposition

The literatures created by marginalized<sup>1</sup> writers in all of their diversity are dynamically spiralling around the western canon, contacting it at certain points, and careening far from it joyfully or painstakingly at others. Extending from the 1960s to the present, a growing body of finely crafted and varied writing presents itself to the student of the new literatures in English. These texts have opened up new environments, discourses, narrative strategies and world views to readers, and have promoted the development of new critical approaches. Ruby Slipperjack and Buchi Emecheta are playing a part in the creation of this body of literature and are the subjects of this study.

Buchi Emecheta, an Igbo<sup>2</sup> woman from Nigeria, began writing in the early 1970s; her autobiographical novel, *Second-Class Citizen*, published in 1975, bears many similarities to her most recent novel, *Kehinde*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1994. In fact, intertextual references<sup>4</sup> are woven throughout her entire body of work. Helen Chukuma's description in 1987 of Emecheta's writing as feminist in vision and "positivistic" in stance applies well to the entire range of her work (3). Emecheta's writing lends itself to feminist and postcolonial critical frameworks but raises interesting questions about fictional autobiography, the new internationalism, and about the writer's role in critiquing her society in neo-colonial times.

Ruby Slipperjack, an Ojibway<sup>5</sup> woman from Northern Ontario, published the first of her two novels in 1987. This work, *Honour the Sun*, is autobiographical and focuses on her childhood with her family in rural Ontario before she goes away to school. Native Canadian

writer Thomas King describes Slipperjack's writing as "associational" because of its ability to remind its Native audience of their continuing, viable culture. Discussing Native literature in "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," King cautions readers against seeking overt colonial themes or polemical discourse in associational writing (14). Unlike some of her contemporary sisters, Slipperjack's work is not easily approached through feminist or postcolonial frameworks and presents sometimes insurmountable obstacles to the "outside" (non-Native) reader. Her work raises interesting questions about the persistence of tradition, the relationship of human beings to the earth, its creatures and to one another, and the vast chasm of ignorance particularly around the commodification of lifestyle within mainstream Canadian culture.

### **Decoding or Reading, Writing or Creating, Texts or Stories**

For the reader immersed in the dominant western culture, the works of Emecheta and Slipperjack call for new ways of knowing. Metaphor plays a supreme role in determining meaning and how we know. Douglas Freake argues that rather than being "an ornament of thought," metaphors are the ground and determinant of thought: "The process and act of knowing, which eventually produces knowledge of all types, is always carried under the aegis of metaphor" (232). Since it is impossible to escape metaphor, it is important to examine "the metaphors that underlie or inform various formulations of knowledge ..." (Freake 233).<sup>6</sup> "[A]ny metaphor's power is largely dependent on its ability to block other choices. If one metaphor dominates becoming literal or 'naturalized' only a change in the material base and then the ideological superstructure of a society can effect a change in its naturalized metaphors" (Freake 234). Freake points to the code metaphor as determinant throughout most of this century

usurping the sight metaphor which formed the metaphor of knowledge for the humanist tradition. Knowledge is conceptualized as “the understanding and manipulation of a code” (Freake 238). Connections made via linguistics between biology (genetic code) and language (semiotics) result in seeing “code-making as the characteristic human trait” (Freake 238). Although code metaphors have influenced thought previously,<sup>7</sup> Freake points to the new assumption that the most important kind of knowledge is not “transcendent,” a value both sight and hearing metaphors take for granted, but “remains in the code itself” (239). Codes run parallel to reality, are self-referential, and “cannot be taken as a revelation or manifestation of that reality” (Freake 241). The code is inorganic and is privileged (via reason) over all forms of knowing and across many disciplines.

Freake discusses the emergence of a new metaphor,<sup>8</sup> “experiential realism,” which is organic and embodied, as opposed to the mechanistic, inorganic code metaphor (246-7). This new metaphor implies that knowledge is “embodied and rooted in the world” (Freake 248). The capability of imagining and valuing embodied ways of knowing is necessary for the appreciation of the works of Slipperjack and Emecheta. Traditional Igbo and Anishnawbe cultures have different material bases than western culture. The different ideologies resulting from this are more closely approached through the metaphor of knowledge which Freake calls “embodiment.” The works of Emecheta and Slipperjack emerge from either experiential or embodied ways of knowing; some of the ways their points of view get represented in their works will be explored in the chapters dedicated to each of these writers.

In *Points of Contact*, which discusses traditional and non-traditional literatures, Norman Simms refers to George Steiner’s comments on the limitations of the literary code:

the literary code is not merely a repository of knowable things but also a paradigm of omission “to exclude, to ostracize into silence or into the zone of taboo expression large areas of indecorous or frankly menacing psychological and social fact.” (Simms 180)

Simms points out that during the last 150 years or so since the domination of literacy, if language did not express something, it simply did not exist; therefore, “much of reality did not exist or led a half-life of conventional, obscuring hearsay” (180). Dependence on literacy as a way of knowing (the code) becomes what Freake refers to as “literal.” “Novels become histories of the present,” Simms believes, and “[w]hat cannot be expressed, the reading public comes to feel is not real: metaphor and metonym fade away, symbols wither” (180). Simms feels that the entrance of marginalized, cross-cultural writers [such as Slipperjack and Emecheta] into this scene destabilizes readers who are dominated by the code metaphor. These writers can use the tools associated with this type of knowing (European languages and literary techniques), yet they are not dominated by the code metaphor. They may have other ways of knowing. “Then come the other writers, the writers of the ‘other,’ those who have learned the techniques of the European book but [have] not been fully absorbed by its myths; they write out the unspeakable and the unimaginable” (Simms 180).

### **Incommensurability or Classical Rhetorical Comparison?**

How a person writes and reads depends upon who they are and where they stand. As a Canadian reader, I am haunted by an identity inseparable from the Indigenous presence. I stand in the interstices reading Ruby Slipperjack, trying to listen to the silences, but I am jarred and embarrassed by the confident hand of hopeful reconciliation extended within Buchi Emecheta’s transparent language. The reading of disparate traditions in juxtaposition can destabilize and

confuse the western reader. However, denied a unified gaze amongst this plurality the reader may avoid what Margaret Higonnet calls “static rediscovery of cherished preconceptions” (13). Nevertheless, it is inescapable that comparative studies are tainted with linear, reductive limitations and from a postcolonial perspective are even more suspect, according to Natalie Melas, “of pretensions to the general or even the universal” (275). Melas addresses comparative theory by examining the historic rhetoric of comparatism which viewed the comparative act as consisting of two parts, one qualitative and one quantitative. She posits a comparison that would “not synthesize similarities into a norm,” avoiding “a conjunction between similarity and value” (275). The example offered by Melas<sup>9</sup> demonstrates how the quantitative portion “enforces preexisting similarities,” but the qualitative portion inverts similar things, establishing “new resemblances, stretching the limits of a code” (277). Comparative literary practice may offer an opportunity to read non-traditional works and to find new understanding, new ideas and to expand our ideas of what is “true” or what is knowledge, even venturing near the borders of the code to find new ways of knowing.

In this spirit of inquiry I undertake a comparative study of Buchi Emecheta and Ruby Slipperjack, writers from different cultures, Nigerian Igbo and Canadian Ojibway. Wole Soyinka views “comparative literature” as an acceptable, if inadequate, heading under which to study African literature written in English (vii). Diana Brydon and Helen Tiffin in *Decolonising Fictions* preface their text on the “belief that the comparative study of postcolonial literatures in English should be grounded in the differences of their alternative perspectives on the world” (7). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has challenged “the defining norms of national literary analysis” and has argued that “a ‘black’ text must be cited both within the American tradition and within its

particular tradition” (qtd. in Higonnet 8). Despite the difficulties of comparing minority literatures, a dialogical approach<sup>10</sup> reduces the danger, according to David Danow, of silencing the other by the “authoritative word” (124). Danow envisions within this process an “unending ideational exchange” (124).

Brydon and Tiffin note that “the search for non-repressive alternatives to Western ways of knowing” is complex but significant and “just as far-reaching as critiques focused exclusively on Western systems” (16). Other critics see possibilities for applying western theory to postcolonial literatures. Peter Hitchcock, for example, suggests that “dialogic analysis can itself disrupt the restrictive logic and practises of literary studies” (xii). Remaining mindful of the limitations of theory and the impossibility and undesirability of reducing and objectifying the stories of Emecheta and Slipperjack, applications derived from feminist, postcolonial, autobiographical and metaphorical theories can assist to recognize particularities and open up dialogue. The works themselves serve to maintain the tension between the homogenizing influence of theory and extreme difference or diversity which precludes dialogue.

Recent fiction, poetry, drama and critical texts by First Nations writers are exploring exciting and challenging terrain beyond the conventional, yet critical reception is not keeping pace with this renaissance. African literature has received attention internationally for a longer period than Native North American literature; however, African women’s writings are only recently beginning to reach a wider, appreciative audience.

A separate discussion of the works of Slipperjack and Emecheta is the primary focus of this thesis. It may prove helpful to precede these individual chapters with highlights of some of the issues that inevitably arise from the swirl of voices within the new literatures in English.

### **The Limits of Feminist and Postcolonial Theories**

Feminist and postcolonial issues are important within the writings of Slipperjack and Emecheta; as Joanne O'Connell points out, "there is an affinity between postcolonial and feminist theorizing and politics, as both are concerned with issues of identity, representation and renaming" (788). Common linkages between minority cultures relate to their antagonistic association with the hegemonic dominant culture. Recent discussions around the role of feminist theory in addressing emergent women's texts acknowledge differences between Western and Third World feminisms while interrogating the whole idea of a unitary gendered subject. Sonia Saldívar-Hull discusses the impact of racism on the idealized feminist goal of liberating and opening up the literary canon. She addresses the issue of privileging feminist criticism yet excluding "issues of race and class" (182). Sonia Saldívar-Hull notes that "Feminism as a critical political stance is a fraud when practised in a cultural and historical void" (183). Many important issues rise out this debate, and the empowerment of minority voices may result from it. Nevertheless, the critic must supplement socio-political analysis and cultural appreciation with other approaches in order to avoid fragmenting texts and neglecting wider contexts. Caren Kaplan advises the First World critic "to develop a discourse that responds to the power relations of the world system, that is, to examine her location in the dynamic centres and margins" (359).

Though the writings of Slipperjack and Emecheta occur during the historical postcolonial time period, the theory by the same name does not provide all of the needed insights into their literature. Postcolonial theory, frequently applied in the interpretation of Native Canadian and Nigerian literature in English, clearly situates the writing politically and historically and may result in a focus on the binary oppositions of the colonizer and the colonized subjects at a

specific time.

Critics of postcolonial theory are arising from within the literatures themselves. Thomas King, a Native Canadian writer, is outspoken about this issue. According to King, postcolonialism as a concept “reeks of unabashed ethnocentrism and well-meaning dismissal” (“Godzilla” 11). A disregard for pre-European traditions, some still in existence today, and a dependence on nationalism are two major limitations of postcolonial theory.

Before the colonial period, both First Nations people in North America and the many ethnic groups in Africa had rich cultural heritages. Literature, oral or written, existed in specific cultural contexts. An assumption of total erasure of these precedents by European invasion is indicative of a somewhat facile ethnocentrism. Various strands of social discourse occurring today in these cultures could well stretch back to pre-colonial times and find resonance in modern literature. To offer the unitary theme of a power clash between the centre and periphery as the motivating force in contemporary literature is to ignore the possible influence of the rich heritage of the past. Donna Bennett’s work on postcolonial theory in the Canadian context attempts to be inclusive. Ultimately her assessment is that “postcolonial approaches are more useful for identifying differences and tracing out the dynamics of power than for recognizing and valuing similarities and accommodations” (196). She finds the theory useful if it is not seen “as the only way to frame one’s vision” (196). Concepts that have emerged from the model such as the acceptance of hybrid genres (such as fictional autobiography) and heterogeneity will be applied to both *Emecheta* and *Slipperjack*.

### **The Eternal Youth of Exile versus Used-Up Alienation**

As a result of colonization, a variety of issues around exile and language arise in the works of Slipperjack and Emecheta. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft et al. cite various authors to support the contention that exile is a recurrent structural pattern in postcolonial literatures (29). Martin Tucker, in the introduction to his biographical dictionary of literary exiles, notes that the word exile “comes from the Latin root ‘to jump.’ and carries with it the notion of flight ...” (xiv). After leaving Nigeria in 1962 it was in fact many years before Emecheta could return. Exile offers particular challenges for women writers. Often supports which are taken for granted at home are absent. Managing with five small children in London without the support of relatives, Emecheta regrets that work is not shared and that long hours of work away from the children mean that traditions such as storytelling are disappearing in immigrant groups (Kenyon 117). In *Kehinde*, Emecheta’s narrator articulates clearly some of the problems for a woman in contemporary Nigeria and defines herself as an exile. The double exile of being a woman and being colonized is explicit in Emecheta’s novels.

Defining the study of exile in literature in very literal terms, Vytautas Kavolis feels that the spreading of the concept of exile thinly in literary studies leads to all forms of alienation being co-opted and results in “[u]sed up alienation exploit[ing] the eternal youth of exile” (43). Even by Kavolis’s harsh criteria, however, Ruby Slipperjack qualifies as an exile since she “writes within a linguistic universe alien to her” and “remains committed to her native language” (Kavolis 43). Slipperjack sees the departure for residential school, leaving her village, and denial of the opportunity to speak Anishinawbe as the stimulus for her creative writing.

Postcolonial and marginalized writers are focusing on reclaiming identity versus the more

common themes of non-minority writers of alienation and despairing of the loss of identity.

### **Colonizer Language: Alienating and Unifying**

Feminist writers such as Trinh T. Minh-ha acknowledge language as “one of the most complex forms of subjugation, being at the same time the locus of power and unconscious servility” (Minh-ha 52). Previous to the imposed colonial order, long-standing oral literary traditions existed in both Ibo and Ojibway cultures. When a new tradition is superimposed upon an old one, the two traditions influence one another. The English language has been discussed in the literature as both alienating and unifying. In 1993 exiled Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o predicted that “[t]he nineties will see more and more writers trying to break out of the linguistic prison to seek their genuine roots in the languages and rhythms of the dispossessed majority” (*Moving* 108). Bakhtin’s theory of the novel suggests that language is complex, multi-faceted and historically specific. The multiple voicing seen in the novels of Slipperjack and Emecheta interrupts the monologic/monolithic dominant discourse. Evidences of mother tongue and influences from the oral tradition will be discussed in chapter four, as well as the importance of silence and its relationship to exile.

The First Nations and the Igbo culture have resisted, in varying degrees, the wider cultures of their nationhood. Igbos attempted cessation from Nigeria in the 1960s, sparking the devastating Biafran war. Canada’s First Nations resisted constitutional accord during the Meech Lake negotiations and are continuing their land claims throughout the country. They often refer to themselves as separate nations. The Ojibway or Anishinaubek have maintained their language and many cultural traditions. Beth Brant, a Mohawk writer, states, in regard to First Nations

people, that “the dominant society ... hungers for our assimilation into their world, their beliefs, their code” (*Writing* 74). The inherited English canon was, until the 1960s, largely composed of the stories of dead, white, European male writers. In Nigeria and Canada, the canon is also the legacy of the invader-settler-colonizer cultures. Postcolonial and feminist literary critics began some time ago to question the canon. Under scrutiny it was seen to be composed of works from mainstream white, Eurocentric, upper-class men. Though this was thought by some to merely reflect the response by critics to works which reflected their own world view, others felt that choices for the canon validated and reinforced only the powerful. Slipperjack and Emecheta come from oral traditions. Since both of these authors were influenced by a British educational system, the western canon played an important role in their literary formation. Canadian writer Marlene Nourbese Philip vividly describes the duality of vision that the colonial legacy combined with her oral cultural traditions gave her. She conceives of her audience over her right shoulder as “MALE, WHITE AND OXFORD-EDUCATED”; over her left shoulder is her other audience: “she is old, Black and wise” (26). Both Slipperjack and Emecheta write within similar dualities. The reception of the new writing emerging from such dualities is heavily dependent upon the literary communities in Canada, Britain and Africa, yet mainstream critics are generally monocultural in their approaches, deaf to the multiple voices within the literatures.

### **A Background Sketch of African and Native Canadian Writing**

A body of African work written in English developed rapidly enough for Edgar Wright to see this literary movement by 1973 acting as “a powerful agent” in influencing the “relationship between literature and the critical comment that develops about it” (ix). Women writers were

largely invisible in this movement. Relative to many other “new” literatures in English, Igbo literature has received more extensive coverage for a longer period of time. Ernest Emenyonu, in *The Rise of the Igbo Novel*, notes that the first Igbo authors writing in English were expatriates publishing as early as 1789.<sup>11</sup> Since the early 1960s, critical works have been written on African literature, often by African novelists such as Chinua Achebe and Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka. The same attention has not been paid to African women writers, an issue which Laretta Ngcobo addressed in 1984 at a forum in London, England on the African Women Writer:

Ours is a fledgling literature, fighting for its survival at all levels. Not only do we have to contend with the problems of writing, but we have problems communicating with publishers with critics, and even with institutions of learning—very few in the British Isles concern themselves with the views of African women. (82)

Recent indications are that more African women’s work is being published and critical works by women are following.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps due to the early start of African critical debate, and the earlier development of some women writers with substantial bodies of work, regionalist critical works on African women’s writing are now emerging. For example, in 1989, Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo edited *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*, dedicated “to the Nigerian female writers who dare to ‘challenge the dominant paradigm’” (v). Critics are able to compare writers and carry on a dialogue about the images portrayed by their women writers and in this way gain richer perspectives on their own cultures and evolving identities.

Nigerian professor Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie notes that women and men have always shared cultural productions within the oral tradition. As an example of the interplay between

texts in the postcolonial period in Nigeria, Ogundipe-Leslie notes that Flora Nwapa (the first published Nigerian female novelist) said that her novel, *Efuru*, was a reply to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the same lecture Ogundipe-Leslie decried the fact that until recently there was a withholding of large areas of women's cultural attainments and knowledge in the colonial and postcolonial periods. African women are now becoming critical of the image of women portrayed in literature by both African and European male writers. Ngcobo, in her essay "The African Woman Writer," states that women are represented in novels as "cardboard characters" (81). Mineke Schipper says that African "literary criticism, no less than literature itself, bears the stamp of male domination" ("Women" 51). Emecheta finds some obstacles to her work in the form of gender bias as evidenced by a review which Schipper quotes of Emecheta's writing by Nigerian critic Femi Ojo-Ade, who "dictates to African women writers what they ought to do" ("Women" 52). Ojo-Ade is, according to Schipper's definition, an exclusionary critic. Schipper quotes Ojo-Ade as saying that "(women) writers dwell too much upon the malady of male chauvinism" ("Women" 52). Emecheta's response to Ojo-Ade's criticism of African women's writing is that "[i]t is much too simplistic to argue that women who stand up for their rights are contaminated by western feminism—as if that's all there is to it" ("Women" 53). Schipper, calling for inclusive methodologies versus the more common, somewhat colonial, exclusive approach, points out that the inclusive critic is open and "is not out to accept or reject a work on the basis of his own current scale of values, but considers literary texts against the background of the contexts where they originated" ("Women" 52).

Problems of publishing, censorship and political oppression plague many African writers, but their voices are still being raised in resistance or participation in dialogue.<sup>13</sup> The intertextual

dialogue spoken of by Ogundipe-Leslie has expanded to critical works, and a lively discussion carries on between feminist and non-feminist, African and non-African critics internationally and a healthy diversity is emerging which hopefully will continue to grow. Unlike African literature, critical approaches have not paralleled the growth of Native literature in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

Robin McGrath and Penny Petrone sketch the history of Native Canadian literature and debate its place in Canadian culture in a paper published in 1990. They begin with Native literary origins, the various oral traditions found in seven main cultural areas: “Eastern Woodlands, Plains, Plateau, North Pacific Coast, Western and Eastern Subarctic and Arctic” (309). Ruby Slipperjack’s Ojibway ethnic traditions share many characteristics with other Eastern Woodlands groups. The oral literary tradition, according to McGrath and Petrone, is “rooted in and transmitted through storytelling and public ceremony” (309).

Ojibway people based in Ontario were among the first to write in English in the mid-nineteenth century. The first Canadian Native to publish a book in English was George Copway, an Ojibway; *The Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh* was published in 1847 (McGrath and Petrone 311). This autobiographical work was highly successful, going through six editions and becoming internationally known. Petrone’s classic *Native Literature in Canada: From Oral Tradition to the Present* discusses an Ojibway woman writer Catherine Sonego Sutton (1823-1865), whose Ojibway name was Nah-nee-bah-wee-quay (“Upright Woman”). Many of Sutton’s articulate letters of advocacy and protest still exist (Petrone 65).

McGrath and Petrone sadly note that by the late 1880s the body of Native literature which had accumulated was primarily of a polemical or political nature: “petitions, speeches in council, letters of protest, memorials ... with an overriding theme of a sense of loss” and “literary output

during the first half of the twentieth century was meagre” (313). Beth Brant, though an avid reader, did not know until she was an adult “that Native people wrote books, and that Pauline Johnson, a Mohawk writer, had been published in the last century” (*Writing* 121).

The 1960s saw the re-emergence of Native literature.<sup>15</sup> Maria Campbell’s autobiography *Half-Breed* came out in 1973 and had and continues to have an enormous impact on Canadian Native writing. This text is exceptional in its realistic and honest depiction of Campbell’s place in the unjust society. In 1974, George Manuel, the great political activist from the Shuswap Nation in British Columbia, published *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*. Manuel used this term “The Fourth World” to designate aboriginal peoples internationally.

McGrath and Petrone state that the 1980s saw the Native people use more outlets for written expression than ever before (315). Jeanette Armstrong’s *Slash* (1985) was the first novel by a Canadian Indian woman (Lutz, *Contemporary* 13). Ruby Slipperjack published her first novel in 1987. Women are well represented in this recent renaissance; just a few names serve as examples: Jeanette Armstrong, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Lee Maracle, Beth Brant, and Rita Joe. These writers, among others in Slipperjack’s cohort, have produced novels or collections of their own poetry and writings. Many First Nations writers have contributed to anthologies and have written in a variety of genres.<sup>16</sup>

Slipperjack’s work is generally either ignored or superficially discussed by mainstream critics. For example, reviews of *Honour the Sun* classify and confine her work as juvenile literature, or decline to view its complexity and opt for calling it polemical. The lively dialogue that exists within the African writing community about the meaning of texts is only beginning in the Canadian scene. In order to understand the tardiness of critical response to Canadian First

Nations literature it is necessary to discuss the contemporary environment of Canadian criticism and theory.

### **Canadian Theory—A Calculator with an Attitude?**

Despite the recent outpouring of creative work in many genres, Native literature still appears to be viewed narrowly in oratorical or polemical terms by the Canadian mainstream critical community. Ronald Wright, in his revisionist history of Amerindian cultures, describes the rooted, imperialist myths that have persisted regarding aboriginal peoples. Emma LaRocque points out that “generally the Canadian intellectual establishment has disregarded Native writing” (“Preface” xix). LaRocque, a literary scholar and poet, is in touch with her Cree roots and writes articulately about her struggle to maintain her cultural integrity and connectedness in the face of academic demands for objectivity and fragmentation. She suggests that the continued suppression of the voices of Native peoples is largely the responsibility of the Canadian literary community and cites the present concepts of literary scholarship in academia for separating the “word” from the “self” and for refusing to allow scholars to speak in their own voices (“Preface” xxi). Examining LaRocque’s arguments in the context of the Canadian critical and literary community may be helpful for understanding the ambiguous position of Native writing in mainstream Canadian literature today.

Recent critical output indicates that mainstream Canadian critics are doing some self-reflective analysis and also are focusing on process more than in the past. Discussions of the Canadian canon have given way to analyzing the history of literary responses to Canadian literature in general, since these issues have direct application on what enters the canon. Barry

Cameron, Robert Lecker, Frank Davey, Donna Bennett and others have addressed the question of where Canadian literary criticism has gone since its emergence in the 1960s and where it is headed in the future. Other critics such as Lynette Hunter and Julia Emberley seek a common ground to read cross-culturally or stress the complexity of historical and feminist politics in Native women's writings.

Barry Cameron sees thematic criticism, like that outlined in Atwood's *Survival*, as an attempt to "repudiate ... colonial criticism [such as Northrop Frye's in his "Conclusion" to the first edition of *The Literary History of Canada* which focused on the Canadian as an unfinished European]" (126). Cameron suggests that the influence of thematic critics may be due to a desire for a tradition and origins which Canadians feel they do not have (126). Emergent critical practice questions the assumption that language is a transparent medium (Cameron 131). In his rapid review of literary theory, Cameron never makes explicit the role of Canada's First Nations in the critical imagination. In his style of discourse and his call for research into genre, as well as his elevation of literature to high art stature, Cameron represents a critical approach which effectively excludes many literatures of lesser diffusion.

In *Post-National Arguments*, his 1993 text analyzing sixteen contemporary Canadian novels, Frank Davey includes Native writer Jeanette Armstrong's novel *Slash* and demonstrates an interest in the implicit politics in literature. He finds little common ground between the visions of society in Euro-Canadian novels and those of Indigenous characters or writers. Robert Lecker addresses the social responsibility of the critic and regrets that Canadian criticism has become a private affair, "removed from public access, divorced from its communal frames" and unable to effect change or find an audience outside of the academy (32). Lecker points to

academic and theoretical specialization and self-consciousness on the part of writers as markers of “privatization” resulting in a deterrent to critical debate. This may result in what some critics have predicted—an aversion to and breakdown of Canadian literature. LaRocque’s feeling of alienation within the academy is mirrored, but only somewhat explained, by Lecker’s theory about privatization. What is perhaps most important about Lecker’s exploration for approaches to minority literatures is his testing of the “idealist assumption that canons facilitate the creation of grammars of dissent” (69). Lee Maracle finds that “European scholars” have “an alienated notion that maintains that theory is separate from story, and thus that a different set of words is required to ‘prove’ an idea than to ‘show’ one” (“Oratory” 7). She concludes that “story is the most persuasive and sensible way to present the accumulated thoughts and values of a people” (“Oratory” 7). Maracle finds theory devoid of people and passion; “[w]hat we have left is a calculator with attitude” (“Oratory” 8).

Donna Bennett claims that “when Canadian culture is called post-colonial today the reference is very rarely to the Native culture” (167). Bennett quotes an article by Boire pointing to “the experience the re-colonizer enjoys at the expense of the twice colonized” and the absence of guilt at effacing cultures evidenced in Canadian writing (174). Bennett further notes that since the emergent First Nations writers identify themselves as “a group without memory of any other home country,” they have little in common with French and Anglo Canadians (173). This leads her to suggest that Canadian Native writers might find more in common with “writers from indigenous postcolonial societies, such as India or Nigeria, who were formerly occupied imperial nations” (175). Though this argument points to the importance of comparative studies such as this one, it may also be used to support the current erasure of minority literatures from the canon.

African-American critic bell hooks says that disregarding marginalized literature implies “that women of colour represent this group whose experiences and whose writing is so far removed from that of white women that they cannot address such work critically and analytically” (47). hooks, addressing the role of the mainstream critic towards minority literatures, says that recent feminist writing focusing on difference, especially racial differences, “has led to a sense that white women must abdicate responsibility for responding to works of ‘different others’ .... This assumption may well reinforce racism” (47). Thus the solidification of the Canadian canon and the ineffectual, de-humanized, jargon-heavy, politically naive, possibly racist critical commentary mean that the writings of First Nations are not being received by the Canadian mainstream public or by Native audiences. The lack of reception of Native literature is important because as Daniel David Moses states, “we are in history and this [Native] writing is very involved in that history” (Moses and Goldie xiii).

The stanza from Tobias’s poem used in the opening epigraph implies that there is a strong sense of Indigenous presence in Canadian identity and imagination. Terry Goldie apparently concurs: “there is a sense that a white appropriation of Native voices is trying almost to swallow Native culture and have it inside” (xv). For at least three decades Native critics have been calling for a stop to appropriation. In 1975 Emma LaRocque wrote her scathing account (*Defeathering the Indian*) of the devastating effects cultural erosion from the educational system had on Native children. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias urges “[r]eclaiming the Native Voice” in *Fireweed* in 1988 and advises Eurocanadians to “[s]top stealing Native stories” in the *Globe and Mail* in 1990. Beth Brant, while admonishing the white culture to listen, and not steal Natives’ stories, spirit or dreams, nevertheless acknowledges “our history of the last five-hundred years is so entangled

with yours [the dominant Canadian culture]. I do not say that only Native peoples can write about Natives. I will never say that" (*Writing* 52). Marie AnnHarte Baker feels "The issue of cultural appropriation is not only confusing and contradictory, but Native women have acted quite contrary to THEIR self-interests" ("Gotta" 298).<sup>17</sup> The enclosure, ghettoization and appropriation of cultural traditions is a real danger which theoretical discourse, if one is to accept Maracle's position, promotes rather than prevents. European critics of Canadian literature are more generous in their assessment of our critical debates. Hartmut Lutz, in his preface to *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* states, perhaps prematurely, that "mainstream literary scholars in Canada are discovering Native writing as a new field of exploration on which to test their critical theories" (6). He takes an equally optimistic view of how the Canadian literary community is handling the major controversy about appropriation of Native voice: "The appropriation discussion on Canada has challenged non-Native authors to enter a dialogue with Native writers and readers unparalleled elsewhere" (6).

### **Public Professionals Standing on Guard or Ancient Word Warriors?**

Lecker envisions his fellow critics as "public professionals" compelled to "stand on guard" for Canadian literature (75). Agnes Grant says "virtually never do we ponder, dissect, critique, analyze, and finally incorporate as our own the words of Native writers" (125). This, she suspects, helps to explain why there is such an empty space, a void for Native students of Canadian literature (124).

Ironic parallels exist between Lecker's ethnocentric vision and Kerrie Charnley's "Concepts of Anger, Identity and Power and the Vision in Writings and Voices of First Nations

Women.” Charnley claims that the only reason that Native voices have been “harboured” through five hundred years of oppression and silencing is because of the “word warriors” (12). She asks why, with all of the liberating action in the sixties and seventies, Native voices were not heard then. Her answer is that “[t]he voices of Native women continued to be silenced in the sixties and seventies by the racist and patriarchal children of colonialism” (11). Lecker is missing a large piece in his search for social awareness in the Anglo-literary community if he does not acknowledge such articulate and unequivocal voices.

Donna Smyth, in her essay “Articulating: Theory and Praxis,” notes that the emergence of formerly unheard voices is leading to a new world order. She states that “critical theory, if it is worthy of our attention, must help us to understand the process and give us the power to direct it towards a common future which includes the new stories” (62). Annie Dillard notes the trend in modern fiction to becoming self-aware and ironic and she warns that “fiction [only] keeps its audience by retaining the world as its subject matter” (78). More recently, John Ralston Saul (1992) calls for a return of the author as “the faithful witness,” an important role he feels authors have abandoned (536). The history of criticism in Canada as described above and the domination of the code have resulted in the pushing of non-traditional literatures out into the margins accounting for the present monocultural literary environment.

### **Sisters of Difference**

Despite their different origins and cultures, and the disparity in the reception of their works, Emecheta and Slipperjack belong to a sisterhood of difference. Both women were raised in traditional cultures from which they departed, travelling geographically and linguistically to

live in exile in the places of their colonizers. Both of them write autobiographically, allowing their roots, growing in the margin, to show, and both writers have recreated their homes within their imaginative writing. The dialogic margins created by the works of Emecheta and Slipperjack open spaces, permitting new readings, theoretical and ideological, of the traditional western canon and allow other marginalized voices from sisters of difference both past and present to be heard.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study result from the scope and the point of view of its author writing from within a privileged Eurocentric academy about writers outside of this setting. Due to the breadth resulting from comparing authors from two distinct cultures, a limited number of Buchi Emecheta's many works will be addressed. It will not be possible to exhaust intertextual<sup>18</sup> influences in these works. It is difficult to identify who were the models for Slipperjack and Emecheta since both seem to be early pioneers in their literatures, yet this may be an obstacle in approaching women's writing in general. Adrienne Rich states that "each feminist work has tended to be received as if it emerged from nowhere" appearing as though it had no tradition ("Foreward" 11). Since issues of publishing and distribution are of major importance for literatures of lesser diffusion, they will be referred to as they specifically apply to Slipperjack and Emecheta. However, to address the whole infrastructure of academic, political and economic forces that influence publishing in England, Nigeria, and Canada would require a whole other study.

As a Canadian and a member of a social majority I have inherited a tradition of denial

around racism and neo-colonialism. I can only suspect that First Nations people have been part of my definition as a Canadian, yet I cannot articulate this subjective bias in appropriate academic discourse. A similar layer of unconscious bias stands in the path of my reading of African literature. The naming of these barriers in no way solves my difficulties in writing about these literatures and it would be false of me to participate in an illusion of order or imply a solution to these very significant problems.

The underlying approach will be to situate the novels culturally and historically for better understanding and appreciation. Following a discussion of several of Emecheta's representative works and Slipperjack's two novels and poem, a separate chapter on language will address current debate in both Africa as a whole and among First Nations authors regarding the use of imperial language and the language strategies which Emecheta and Slipperjack have used in their writing. Methodologies outlined above, for discussing the writing of Slipperjack and Emecheta, will serve as a caution of possible pitfalls in interpretation and hopefully will offer positive alternatives, opening a critical space in which to discuss these works in a dialogic manner without translating and unifying them, but maintaining their difference and diversity.

The memories each reader brings to a text, and the memories from which each critic forms a critical framework to analyze a text are both brought to bear on texts of other cultures in complex ways. The Anglo-Canadian student of emergent literatures finds her/himself in a chaotic, decentered time in history when it is impossible to ignore the urgency of the subject and the need for creative, situated approaches. Such a stance is not confined to First Nations literature but applies to African literature as well. Direction for approaching emergent literatures comes from divergent sources. Marginalized writers offer pragmatic and fresh insights into writing and

not all of them present a comfortable space for western readers. Lee Maracle offers one instructive example in her analysis of her own writing in *I Am Woman*. In her chapter “I Want to Write” she credits her children with teaching her that “what is revival and renaissance for a Native is death for a colonizer. For both of us there is reconstruction and a future full of passion and compassion” (10-11).

## Chapter Two

### Translating Life into Literature

#### Buchi Emecheta: A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Life Experiences

So I worked out a plan. While my family slept I wrote the ideas, and when they were awake I typed them out. I have to write because of them [her children].

Buchi Emecheta, *Head Above Water* 60

### Introduction

Buchi Emecheta is a pioneer. She is the first black African woman writer to produce such a large body of work and to become a full-time professional writer. All of her writing is intimately bound to her lived experience; as Elaine Savory Fido points out, Emecheta's experience of making texts is "sometimes so tightly woven into [her] living that one and the other are hard to separate" (331). In addition, Emecheta provides her audience with an autobiography which fleshes out her fictional identity. Emecheta's autobiographical writing is on the forefront of what Janice Morgan calls a new poetics created by "writing at the margins of public discourse" from an imposed "otherness" (12). Writing in Britain, Emecheta speaks out against injustice in the country of her exile. As an Igbo woman, Emecheta's work is grounded in her culture, yet critical of the injustices in it. Marie Umeh, editor of a 1996 volume of essays on Emecheta's work, believes that "Emecheta's reputation in world letters as a major voice in African woman's liberation rests on her protest against the victimization of women in Ibo society, and by extension, in all societies" (xxiv). In a combined review of Emecheta's autobiography (*Head Above Water*), *Second-Class Citizen* and *Kehinde*, Margaret Busby remembers that cynics predicted that so autobiographical a writer could produce only one novel

(29). Busby explains, in contrast, that Emecheta “showed unflinching determination to fashion literature out of a life she could cope with only by rebelling against expectations” (29).

This chapter will trace some of the paths taken by Buchi Emecheta on her journey in exile from her motherland to the home she has created with language. Central to this endeavour is an attempt to identify some of the eclectic influences on the content, style and structure of several of her seminal novels.

### **Brief Biographical Sketch<sup>1</sup>**

To discuss Emecheta’s writing, whether it be her first journalistic exploration of her life on welfare, *In the Ditch*, or her 1994 novel *Kehinde*, is to speak of Emecheta’s life as a whole. Convention demands chronologically ordered, linear outlines of author’s biographies.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Emecheta, this provides an interesting challenge, not due to a paucity of information, but due to an abundance of it.

When Florence Onyebuchi Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria on 21 July 1944, both of her parents were originally from Ibusa, Delta State (Umeh 457). In *Head Above Water* Emecheta recalls the “many angles of the story” of her birth told by members of her family—particularly the version told by her aunt whom she refers to as her “big mother,” a respected *griot* [village storyteller] in Ibusa.

Although the linear chronology only records that Emecheta began elementary school in Lagos in 1951 and secondary school in 1954, the death of her father occurred during her early school years and had a devastating impact on the family. Emecheta mentions this briefly and poignantly in her autobiography: “Unfortunately my father died ... I was so young ... I loved my

father so much that I still think I am going through life looking for him” (*Head 25*). The death of her father meant poverty for the family, but Emecheta won scholarships and so was able to attend secondary school. She notes that if she had stayed at home she would have been forced to marry by the time she was twelve (*Head 25*).

Both traditional African and Western Christian systems created the necessity for many young women including Emecheta to reject their traditions in order to achieve the goals which both cultures imposed upon them. As a result of these conflicting tensions and the impossibility of continuing in school as a single woman, in 1960 at the age of seventeen Emecheta graduated and married Sylvester Onwordi; in the same year her first daughter was born, followed by a son in 1961. Leaving Nigeria in 1962, Emecheta joined Onwordi in London and ten months later gave birth to a second son. In 1964 a second daughter was born, followed by a third after Emecheta had left her husband. In 1966 Emecheta left her husband (Umeh 457). This painful period of her life is detailed in *Head Above Water* in a chapter ironically entitled “Culture Shock” (28-34), as not only did her experience in England (previous chapter “the Holiest of Holies”) shock her, but also marriage to a traditional Ibo man who proved to be brutal, lazy and unintelligent. As Emecheta writes: “I set my heart on making a successful marriage, because they had taught us at the Methodist Girl’s High School that prayers and devotion could move mountains. It did not work out for me that way” (23). Her first novel, *The Bride Price*, was burned by Onwordi, and this was the catalyst for the breakup of the relationship.

Emecheta made plans to leave Onwordi from the moment the manuscript was destroyed. She writes: “I felt the native, bush independent woman in me come to the fore. I packed my dripping four siblings and pregnant self and faced the streets of London” (“Head Above Water”

90). While a student and single parent of five children, Emecheta wrote autobiographical sketches about living as a single mother in poverty in London in a place called Pussy Cat Mansions. These were first published as columns in *The New Statesman* in 1971, as the novel *In the Ditch* in 1972, and later serialized in *Nova*, which Emecheta describes as “a glossy, high-class magazine for the liberated woman” (Head 72). Her novel *Second-Class Citizen*, based on the same experiences, was published in 1975 and awarded the Daughter of Mark Twain award. Two plays were also published the same year: *A Kind of Marriage* and *Juju Landlord*.

Emecheta’s educational achievements in the midst of her creative and journalistic writing are impressive. In 1974 she obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Sociology from London University, followed two years later by a Masters degree in Philosophy from the same university.

*The Bride Price* was published in 1976. *The Slave Girl*, published in 1977, garnished two awards: The New Statesman/Jock Campbell and the Sunrise for Best Black Writer in the World. *The Joys of Motherhood* (Best British Writer’s Award, 1980) and two children’s books, *Titch the Cat* and *Nowhere to Play*, followed in 1979. Two adolescent novels, *The Moonlight Bride* and *The Wrestling Match* (1980), were closely accompanied by a collaborative work with Maggie Murray from the University of Calabar, *Our Own Freedom*, published in 1981. *Destination Biafra*, *Naira Power* and *Double Yoke* were the first books produced by Emecheta’s own publishing company Ogwugwu Afor established in 1982. *Adah’s Story* and *The Rape of Shavi* followed in 1983. *A Kind of Marriage* (1986) and *Gwendolen* (1989) are followed by *Kehinde*, published in 1994. In 1994, as well as publishing *Kehinde*, Heinemann re-published all of Emecheta’s adult novels and her autobiography *Head Above Water* [African Writers Series]. *Head Above Water* (1986) is dedicated to Chiedu, her eldest daughter, who died tragically in

1984. Emecheta's experiences as a fatherless girl desperately seeking education, an immigrant, an estranged Igbo wife, a mother, and a developing author make fascinating reading in themselves. *Head Above Water* begins by recording the tension between traditional Nigerian customs, western education/London lifestyle, and Emecheta's own unique personality.

Academic positions and honours accompany this amazing literary output. In 1985 Emecheta began teaching creative writing at London University and from 1986 to the present she holds the title of Fellow there. She received an Honorary Doctor of Literature from Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, New Jersey in 1992 (Umeh 457-59).

Years of difficult academic study and challenging social work eventually abated and Emecheta was able to devote all of her time to writing. Emecheta is quoted by Kenyon in 1992 as saying that she now supports about thirty people, including her own children and relatives in Nigeria, from the proceeds of her writing. More importantly, she has a home of her own in London, and can "tell" her stories from her own home (*Head* 228).

### **Influences**

Susan Griffin believes that "[t]o write one must have a sense of self ... one must begin with the sense that one's own life is worthy of scrutiny" (4). How did Emecheta manage this? Her very early memories about the way she was told the story of her life offer clues. The thread of the traditional griottes and their inspiration is woven through Emecheta's writings, introduced in many of her novels and described beautifully in *Head Above Water* in the chapter "What They Told Me." In this chapter she describes with the flair of an epic poet her aunt, a village griot, dramatically narrating the story of Emecheta's premature birth in Lagos, her struggle to survive

and the meaning of her father's special name for her (8-10). It is interesting too that this story may describe the origins of self-worth which facilitated Emecheta's later authorship. Though the sense of worthiness which Griffin refers to is transmitted by this experience, it is significant that it occurs in an African context. The context is a communal one in that Emecheta's story is narrated with all of Emecheta's little relatives sitting around her and the story connects the living with the ancestors and with all of the audience. Thus both Emecheta's style of narration and her confidence to write owe a great deal to the influence of the griottes in Iboza, rural Nigeria. Umeh points out that Emecheta is influenced not only by Ibo culture but also by "the oral traditions of Yoruba, Hausa, and Itskeiri" (xxix).

Although the language is English, Emecheta's writing is clearly infiltrated by Igbo narrative. Examples of this include the occasional use of untranslated Igbo words, vernacular words, plenty of dialogue, proverbs, repetition, idiomatic language, and songs or invocations. In Susan Arndt's analysis, Emecheta's work demonstrates a poetics of "writing back to Ifo" (30). Ifo is one name given to Igbo oral narrative. Arndt feels that Emecheta uses this tradition much the same way that male African novelists use narrative in a dialogue with racist European texts to offer another perspective on Africa. Although Ifo stories are educative and most often narrated by women, the ideology of these tales is misogynist and they contain many stereotypes of women. In Ifo, for example, women are discussed as property, defined by motherhood, the cause of all sexual impropriety, and helpless to "influence their future actively" (Arndt 34). Ifo stories, according to Arndt, "use irony in order to suggest meaning without stating it" (28). Many of these stereotypes are addressed and contradicted in Emecheta's novels. The irony Emecheta incorporates into most of her writing may be directly influenced by Ifo.

The discipline required for Emecheta to be a student and a mother at the same time might have influenced her to apply herself to writing. She has cited her children as definite influences on her writing. As a conscious choice, her children became integrated into Emecheta's life enough to provide an inspiration for her writing (in the sense of leaving a legacy for them) and enough for her to view their presence and responsibility as a positive influence on it. In *Head Above Water* Emecheta notes how her husband washed his hands of any paternal responsibility; she confesses, "If my marriage had worked, I would probably have ... tucked myself away in a public library and dreamed of becoming a writer one day" (61).

Emecheta's father, as well as contributing to her sense of self-esteem at a young age, fired her imagination regarding the United Kingdom. In her autobiography she describes the mythology which grew up around Britain: it seemed as mysterious for her as that which grew up around the story of her birth. She estimated that "[g]oing to the United Kingdom must surely be like paying God a visit" (24). Following her early, familial and cultural influences, Emecheta was exposed to English literature and the Bible in secondary school. In her essays on Pussy Cat Mansions in *In the Ditch* she makes an explicit reference to Dickens, indicating how his interpretation of the working class in England is impressed on her imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Emecheta recalls in *Head Above Water* how she was constantly humiliated for being late for school because she was dreaming of the poetry of Rupert Brooke, Shakespeare and Keats. When she told her English teacher she wanted to be a writer, after being late for class, she was told "Pride goes before a fall!" and was asked to leave the class and take a prayer detention (21). To escape from the oppressive school scene Emecheta dreamed of being a storyteller like "our old mothers at home in Ibuza" (22). She saw herself, in these daydreams, using English

(ironically) to compose stories in which she was a heroine with many children. She also notes in *Head Above Water* that she was socialized by the school system to appreciate British literature and language and, that as nostalgic as she was about village life, she had to make a go of the opportunities the education gave her (16).

Modern influences on Emecheta include the recently deceased Flora Nwapa, Nigeria's first internationally published woman author and foremother of many younger African women writers. The influences of Nwapa are seen in a number of ways in Emecheta's fiction but most importantly in their shared themes of resistance to culturally sanctioned male oppression and what Elleke Boehmer calls "domestic matters, politics of intimacy" (12).

Emecheta's writing career was encouraged by a Canadian (another post-colonial like herself) who worked with her at the library. Although Emecheta's husband was convinced that she had no models for becoming a writer and little chance of success, she did receive encouragement from her colleagues at the library. In both her autobiography and her fiction, Emecheta credits a Canadian with introducing her to black American writers such as James Baldwin and then validating her efforts and encouraging her to seek publication when she showed him her handwritten manuscript of *The Bride Price* (*Head* 32). This important influence helped to offset the disparagement and destruction of her work which Emecheta experienced at the time by her husband.

Emecheta's literary and journalistic expression is influenced by her education in sociology. The *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* lists Emecheta as a "Nigerian-born British sociologist, poet and novelist ..." (219). The influences of sociology are found in Emecheta's vocabulary and inspire the plots of many of her novels. In this regard Emecheta might concur

with Arndt who holds the conviction that “[t]o improve women’s situation in a patriarchal society always means correcting the female images that have created and nourished it” (44).

Emecheta resists being labelled as a Feminist writer or as an African writer and has become more comfortable with crossing many borders of literary affiliation to become an internationalist (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 97). The introductory remarks in *Head Above Water* locate the transcendent aspirations under which Emecheta writes. She hopes that “the white European woman from the North will regard the black woman from the South as her sister and that both of us together will hold hands and try to salvage what is left of our world from the mess the sons we have brought into it have made” (1). Emecheta’s novels illustrate the many cosmopolitan influences in her life and tensions between the old and the new, between African and Western world views, and between men and women. In her memoirs she discovers the vital role writing plays in surviving or resolving these conflicts.

From her first novel *In the Ditch* it is apparent that Emecheta is good at both storytelling and dialogue. In a 1982 article entitled “A Nigerian Writer Living in London,” she herself defines her style as “unadorned ... racing, no nonsense, chatty ... I talk that way, and I write that way” (119). Ever candid, she points out to Kenyon when commenting on the autobiographical nature of her first novels that “I didn’t know how to create a different fiction at the time” (Kenyon 52). Bruce King feels that in *Double Yoke* (1982) set in modern Nigeria, Emecheta’s “mixture of hysteria and hard-edged common sense is powerful” (“The New” 203).

Although the autobiographical origins of her work are present, change and predictability are the only other constants in her work. Nevertheless as King says, Emecheta has a “sharply defined personality” despite shifts in her prose “from line to line in register and idiom from

British to Nigerian and through various social levels” (“The New” 201). This description applies to all of her writing whether it is shortened for newspaper columns or journals or book length, both fiction and non-fiction. The varied subject matter, the rainbow of voices reminiscent of oral storytellers and the unique, plebeian writing style of Emecheta’s work, produce a body of rich hybrid literature in which she speaks for herself. Three early novels, *The Bride Price*, *Second-Class Citizen*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*, along with *Kehinde* published in 1994, serve to offer illustrations of the evolution of the author, of cross-cultural tensions in her writing, the autobiographical nature of her work, and the implications of being a woman and an exile. This will lay the groundwork for an examination of her autobiographical writing process.

### **The Price of Tradition**

#### *The Bride Price*

*The Bride Price* originated as the novel in progress burned by Emecheta’s husband, Onwordi. It was meant to be her first work, but became her third published novel after *In the Ditch* in 1972 and *Second-Class Citizen* in 1975. In April 1974, five years after the destruction of the first copy of the manuscript, Emecheta used her sick leave from a job to begin re-writing *The Bride Price*. As *Second-Class Citizen* was not yet published by Allison and Busby she had to sell her car in order to buy time to finish *The Bride Price*. During this period she also did BBC commentaries on current affairs for a very small fee and lunch (*Head* 157).

Emecheta has written candidly about *The Bride Price*. Her expectation that this would be the novel that would earn her fame in Nigeria was not to be. Her BBC play *A Kind of Marriage* (1975) was partially based on the book. In retrospect, she feels somewhat ambivalent about the

book and says, “I could not imagine myself ever being so stupidly romantic” (*Head* 119).

In *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta reproduces the conditions under which Adah, her fictional self, wrote the first draft of *The Bride Price*:

She worked out a timetable, and found that she could manage to have three hours of quiet each afternoon. Then her old dream came popping up. Why not attempt writing? Why not? ...

She ... sat down throughout all those months when she was nursing Dada and wrote the manuscript of a book she was going to call *The Bride Price*. (178)

Emecheta’s commentary about the role of *The Bride Price* in her own development provides a context for this discussion. She notes that her intent in writing it after writing the autobiographical *Second-Class Citizen* was to create “a purely imaginative work” (“That First Novel” 118). At this time she was still feeling a failure for the collapse of her marriage (*Head* 154). Emecheta created a romantic situation with Chike and Aku-nnu that was the reverse of her own marriage. Chike was the nurturing, caring male that Onwordi, Emecheta’s husband, was not. Her original manuscript had the couple, Aku-nna and Chike, living happily ever after; but, she notes in her autobiography that she “had grown wiser since that first manuscript” (*Head* 155). She describes Aku-nna, the protagonist, as having “almost an identical upbringing to mine ... but she was not quite strong enough to shake off all the tradition and taboos that had gone into making her” (*Head* 155). In an amazingly close analogy to her heroine’s life, Emecheta remarks how following the delivery of her first child at seventeen years of age, she haemorrhaged and almost died but for the intervention of “Mrs. Ndukwe,” a staff nurse and friend of her mother<sup>4</sup> (*Head* 155).

The style of *The Bride Price*, and the different voices in it, are reflective of its context and content. Bruce King notes “a conflict between two mentalities” in the novel (“The New” 202). In

the first part of the novel, set in Lagos, “The Burial” chapter makes explicit the two worlds presented in the remainder of the novel. Describing the burial of Ezekiel, Aku-nna’s father, it is clear that his life was lived within two opposing cultural traditions: one tradition was associated with his rural village, ancient customs and pagan religion; the other with the war he fought, the city and Christianity. “He was buried in the same way that he had lived: in a conflict of two cultures” (36).

Aku-nna’s aunt Uzo comes to stay with Aku-nna and her brother after their father dies. Uzo has a nursing infant, and the scenes with the baby provide a soft, pastoral interlude in contrast to the shock of Ezekiel’s death, which happens when their mother is away. One can imagine Emecheta crafting these passages, writing the original text with her baby at her breast. This writing context is reflected in *The Bride Price* in the following passage which takes place in the novel on the first day after her father’s death when Aku-nna wakes and hears a strange noise:

Baby Okechukwu was fast asleep but his sleepy mouth was plugged by Uzo’s heavy nipple. He tugged dozily at his mother’s breast, making funny animal grunts, like a little puppy, as his throat received the milk. Aku-nna smiled despite herself. (42)

This passage comes amidst the rather severe Spartan demands made upon Aku-nna for public display of grieving for her father in her mother’s absence. Information is conveyed by the narrator, as above, through the sensibility of the young protagonist, but in less descriptive, colloquial language tinged with cynicism. For example, after the rigorous mourning speeches “[p]eople later remarked that for a girl not born in Ibuza she did not do too badly” (38). The women, though fulfilling their duty to shriek their mourning cries, “managed to have a touch of apathy in them ...” (37). This irony creates some foreshadowing of the changes which will occur

in Aku-nna's life once the family move to Izu and her widowed mother becomes the wife of Okonkwo, her brother-in-law.

In *The Bride Price* Emecheta sets up oppressive taboos and customs within a traditional cultural context which contains both positive and negative communal female experiences, juxtaposing them with western and Christian influences. Her heroine Aku-nna opposes custom and violates a major taboo in wanting to marry someone of her own choice who was considered to be from a slave family. Aku-nna's death during childbirth is used as a warning to generations of girls to enforce compliance to custom. Margaret Lauer points out that "their lives [were] made an ironic exemplum used to perpetuate the very taboos they had refused to be ruled by" (308). Aku-nna succeeds in opposing tradition by escaping a forced marriage and marrying for love, but she succumbs to traditional taboos by dying during the birth of her first child. Delivering defiant speeches to the end, the dying Aku-nna declares to her husband, "they will all know how passionately we love each other ... Let us call her Joy too, the same name we gave to the bed on which she was conceived" (207).

Lauer concludes that Emecheta presents the "less positive and beneficent" side of tenacious Igbo traditions (308). She contrasts this approach with Achebe's positive presentation of Igbo customs and his belief in their endurance. Helen Chukwuma details the themes relating to customs which Emecheta addresses in *The Bride Price*, for example the "theme of economic exploitation and denial of opportunity of the female for the expressed benefit of the male" (3). Aku-nna's name in fact is symbolic to her father of her commodification: "He had named her Aku-nna, meaning literally 'father's wealth', knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price" (*The Bride Price* 12). Chukwuma points out how

consistently the female protagonist is viewed in an economic light. Aku-nna's step-father/uncle intends to apply her bride price to pay her brother Nna-nndo's school fees. Aku-nna's education is viewed only as valuable because it increases her potential bride price.

Though it is apparent that Emecheta shows the power of the negative and chauvinist side of Igbo custom throughout this novel, it is not true to say that she completely denies the positive side. An astute reader even unaccustomed to Igbo traditions can see that strong female bonding and support are described, as well as positive male characters. Aku-nna's young brother Nna-nndo and her lover/husband Chike stand out as her allies, baulking female-negating traditions at their own peril. Chike, for example, rescues Aku-nna from her abductors and saves her from being raped and treated as a captive wife to Okboshi.<sup>5</sup> These two male characters in fact are adeptly used by Emecheta in supportive roles to her female heroines. Although Chike tries to assist Aku-nna in coping with the onset of puberty by offering her headache pills, information and advice, it is her own female relatives and friends from her own age cohort who provide her with support in this rite of passage. When the onset of her menstruation occurs during a time when she is out cutting wood with her age mates, Aku-nna decides to confide in the girls despite Chike's advice to keep her maturity secret. She realizes that she needs their help despite the knowledge that her position will change once she informs the others. Emecheta's description of the scene conveys the pride and importance which the traditional female culture imparts to womanhood: "Ogugua hugged her tightly with joy, laughing ... she screamed out for the others to come and bear witness that they had gone to fetch firewood with a girl but would be returning home with a grown woman!" (134). At this point the group assist Aku-nna to overcome or cope with taboo and custom; they offer to carry her over the stream (since custom dictates that she is

unclean and may pollute it); and they treated her with “gentle but dignified concern” (134). Aku-nna is from this point an obvious sexual and marital commodity for the males of the village to fight over. At the same time, however, Emecheta narrates the joyful preparations for the coming-of-age dance and the place of honour Aku-nna has in this event. She describes the satisfaction Aku-nna feels at perfecting the dance and the continued support for her development from her age mates. When Chike reports that Aku-nna has passed her exams, Obiajulu, one of her age mates, declares that she “had been certain Aku-nna was going to be a success; she had seen it in a dream” (152). The irony of this statement becomes apparent later in the novel.

It is not surprising that the first non-autobiographical work that Emecheta composed is a romance novel. An interesting and culturally rooted genre exists in Nigeria called Onitsha Market Literature; Emecheta might have been influenced by it. Ernest Emenyonu in *The Rise of the Igbo Novel* maintains:

that the transition from writing in Igbo to writing in English was brought about by a “non-literary group” of Igbo writers called the Onitsha Authors, who wrote pamphlets as they hawked their wares in “otu Onitsha”—the largest market in West Africa. Their creativity was encouraged by the presence of willing entrepreneurs who (as owners of printing presses and bookshops) published and distributed the chap books that have come to be known as “Onitsha Market Literature.” (xv)

Emmanuel Obiechina theorizes that this popular literature has influenced the emergence of the novel in Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> This literature is, he says, “concerned with the business of living” (18).

Romantic love is a major topic of these popular novels and in particular the conflicts between divergent “Western and African systems of love and marriage” (33).

The description of *The Bride Price* as an African Romeo and Juliet and Emecheta’s approval of this comparison demonstrates the juxtaposition of African and European values so

common in Emecheta's work. Many of the experiences of Aku-nna exactly parallel Emecheta's own life and fortunately her readers continue to express appreciation for the skill with which she renders many of these in this novel. Emecheta finds that "African teenagers who have read all [her] books or most of them, think that *The Bride Price* is still [her] best" ("A Nigerian" 119).

### **"My Life Reads Like a Story"**

#### *Second-Class Citizen*

Just as *The Bride Price* is a tragic romance about tradition and cultural conflict, *Second-Class Citizen* is a contemporary, realistic novel of individual development and of the birth of a writer. It is Emecheta's most autobiographical novel, and follows very closely her marriage and separation, the early lives of her children, and her own development as a writer.

In writing *Second-Class Citizen* Emecheta had hoped to create a novel which would provide a preface or explanation for *In the Ditch*. The novel, in the end, became much more complex. To appreciate this complexity the personal, social and historical context at the time of writing *Second-Class Citizen* needs to be mentioned. Emecheta explains in *Head Above Water* that the influences of her education in sociology and her estrangement from her husband are seen in this novel (104-5). During the writing of this novel Emecheta was dealing with her separation from her husband and being a single mother of five children, the beginning of the Biafran war in Nigeria, and her studies in sociology and the various aspects of adapting to British society (*Head* 104).

Emecheta describes the writing of *Second-Class Citizen*, her third novel, as a therapeutic process. In it she experiments with different styles, tones and voices. In light of these features and

the self-reflexive passages about writing itself, it may be described as a novel of artistic development, a *Künstlerroman*. African-American writer Alice Walker called it “one of the most informative books about contemporary African life that [she has] read” (70). Perhaps this statement comes as a form of disclaimer as Walker tries to convince the reader that despite stylistic limitations and being “heavily autobiographical, it is no less valid as a novel” (70).

In her apparent dismissal of the autobiographical features of *Second-Class Citizen*, Walker seems to comply with Afam Ebeogu’s statement that “fiction should not be permitted to degenerate to the banalities of mere autobiography” (82). Emecheta herself seems to have at one point internalized this belief that little imagination is needed for autobiographical fiction and that too much biographical detail needs extensive editing. Describing her writing of this novel Emecheta says: “I was becoming more and more the black woman in the book, Adah. I was a second-class citizen.... I poured all my heart into *Second-Class Citizen*, telling myself that no one would ever publish it” (*Head* 106). Later when the book was published with only minimal copy editing, Emecheta was shocked. She had thought that the editor would “cut parts out of it. She did not” (*Head* 173). In England, *Second-Class Citizen* was widely received, much to Emecheta’s surprise. The year of its publication, 1975, was also International Women’s Year and the first time Emecheta reports that she heard the word feminist applied to her (*Head* 177). Emecheta’s relationship to feminism will be discussed in the conclusion to this chapter.

The omniscient narrator of *Second-Class Citizen* informs the reader that Adah (the protagonist and Emecheta’s alter ego) does not know her exact age. This is because she was a disappointment to her parents because of her gender. Her lack of esteem resulting from the traditional discounting of female children is clear: “She was so insignificant” (7). The narrator

begins *Second-Class Citizen* in a reminiscent, colloquial tone and the reader is addressed directly in the second sentence with “You know ...” (7). The language becomes more objective and less emotional by the last paragraph of the first page. Having introduced the protagonist in the subjective tone of an eight-year-old, the last paragraph encompasses her parents’ utopian rural home village, Ibuza, and the return of the village’s first foreign educated lawyer. Abioseh Porter, approaching *Second-Class Citizen* as a bildungsroman, finds the naive mentality of Adah in the first part of the novel appropriate to a young child. Emecheta is skilled in setting up various and subtle tensions. Cross-cultural, linguistic, class, religious and moral differences are seen through the sensibility of a young, observant protagonist. The necessity of abiding by rules, even unnatural ones, in order to survive and maintain communal order in a huge and diverse city, is impressed upon Adah: “You had to learn to control your temper, which Adah was taught was against the law of nature” (8). The general impression given to Adah is that the city of Lagos is a bad place for children. As much as possible rural customs and beliefs are instilled in the children to offset this.

Having set up the various tensions and the colonial context of the novel, Emecheta proceeds to illustrate the character of Adah by narrating how she forcefully takes herself to school unbeknown to her parents. The passage at the beginning of the novel concerning Adah’s determination to get an education contains important themes which are repeated at different points in the novel. Two important themes revolve around Adah’s dream: one is the paradox of juxtaposing two different or opposing traditions, usually Nigerian and British colonial; the other is the tension between Adah and her mother who, by adhering to tradition, stands in the way of Adah attending school, resulting in Adah turning to men for guidance and support.

On its first page *Second-Class Citizen* introduces conflicting cultural and societal tensions within Adah's life and juxtaposes them with Adah's dream (as powerful as a "Presence"). Adah's dream is never concretely defined in the novel but it serves to guide her in her life and to motivate her to do things, beginning with going to school, then moving to Britain, and finally taking the first steps to becoming a writer. Adah wants an education, or at least the power that education confers on boys and not on girls in her culture. Later her desire for education gets directed into employment and the dream of going to England seems a powerful motivator for her. One question beneath the surface of the novel is whether going to England has a positive or negative effect on Adah's development as an author. The ambivalence around the conflicting inter-tangled dream(s) in *Second-Class Citizen* is reflected in Emecheta's prose styles. Throughout this novel, the style and tone vary.

One demonstration of Emecheta's eclectic writing skill lies in her ability to use olfactory images to add realism to the world of her protagonist. In an early scene when the young Adah arrives unexpectedly in the classroom of her neighbour, a Sierra Leonian teacher, he seats her beside a boy with impetigo on his head who gives her "a bit of his pencil" (12). After the introduction of this scruffy lad, the narrator adds in an aside: "(he later became a lecturer in Lagos City Hospital)" (12). This seemingly casual juxtaposition of paradoxical images of poverty and resultant disease with the image of a prominent doctor, creates a powerful political statement and suggests the possibilities offered by education. Whenever Adah has important transformational experiences, they are etched in her olfactory memory. "Adah scribbled away, enjoying the smell of craw-craw and dried sweat. She never forgot this smell of school" (12).

Adah's adventures are described in *Second-Class Citizen* in Dickensian fashion. A

number of paradoxical coincidences occur with few of them being as happy as her implosion into school. In fact, shortly after her success in forcing her way into school, her father dies and she becomes a Cinderella-like servant in her uncle's house. Nevertheless, Emecheta continues to emphasize Adah's singular dedication to education. In order to sit for a scholarship exam which will enable her to attend secondary school, Adah steals housekeeping money from her uncle.

Emecheta's description of Francis and the brevity of the passage recounting his marriage to Adah generates scathing comments from critics. The steady deterioration of the relationship between Francis and Adah gets emphasized painfully with each of Francis's many failings. Emecheta depicts Francis as doubly and irretrievably colonized: in Nigeria by his parents, and in England by the racist society. Adah's attitude towards Francis seems to be an inversion of both cultures' gender values. On the one hand, when Francis comes to the hospital during his son's illness and cries (something which in western cultures signals caring), the narrator notes that he did not try to reassure Adah or tell her not to worry because "he did not know how to do such things, how to be a man" (69). On the other hand, when Francis acts in a way he thinks is consistent with being an African man, Adah finds him uncivilized. The single-minded deprecation of the character of Francis is often commented on by critics as a defect in the novel. Abioseh Porter, although positive about *Second-Class Citizen* as a whole, feels that Emecheta allows her characterization of Francis to "degenerate into caricature" (273). More importantly, Porter accuses Emecheta of "conveying the impression that she endorses racial stereotypes about black men by suggesting that if only Francis were an Englishman, he would know how to treat his wife with love and respect" (179). Throughout the novel Emecheta does not balk at exposing gender problems in either culture. Chukwuma comes to Emecheta's defence: "Buchi

Emecheta's male characterization is neither exaggerated nor contrived for the purpose of demeaning the male" (11).

Emecheta does not create an idealized protagonist; Adah is not without warts. Because she is able to negotiate the disparate claims posed by two strong cultural influences, Adah survives against great odds. One strategy used by Adah is the application of her Biblical knowledge as a rationalization for taking opportunities which Igbo traditions might proscribe. For example, part of her ambition is to go to England and stay long enough to educate her children there, yet she informs her mother-in-law that she plans to go for little over a year. To justify this deliberate lie she repeats for the second time the Biblical edict, "Be as cunning as a serpent and as harmless as a dove" (37). Somehow this allows her to morally justify breaking the taboos of her traditional culture. Adah's class-consciousness, demonstrated in her dismay at living with Nigerians she considers ethnically, socially and economically her inferiors, is juxtaposed with Francis's negative assimilation: "the day you land in England, you are a second-class citizen. So you can't discriminate against your own people, because we are all second-class," he tells her (43).

Although England is not the land Adah had hoped it would be, she steadfastly retains the dream of educating her two children there. Meanwhile, as a result of marital rape the first night of her arrival, she has become pregnant again. Adah, feeling alienated again from her husband and her Nigerian neighbours, succeeds in getting a first-class job at a library.

Chapter four of *Second-Class Citizen* stands out as a turning point in the novel. As Porter says in analyzing *Second-Class Citizen* as an apprenticeship novel or bildungsroman, "there is always at least one character who, instead of helping the protagonist, will serve as an impediment

to [her] progress” (127). There is less irony and juxtaposition in chapter four than in the previous three chapters; it centres the action wholly in England. The title itself may be the exception to this—“The Daily Minders” does contain irony (47). The reader experiences along with Adah the daily reminders of the indifferent attitudes to children in Britain. The narrator notes that Adah feels the injustice of living a first-class life at work all day and leaving her children in the second-class one with their father. In this chapter the problems of immigrant parenting are detailed; it is basically a scathing attack on the child welfare system in Britain. Once Adah succeeds in finding a registered child-care minder, she discovers that this person, Trudy, is little better than a prostitute and due to carelessness and conditions of squalor, Adah’s youngest child develops life-threatening meningitis. At last Adah comes face to face with the reality of her idealization of Britain. “As for Adah, she listened to Trudy destroying forever one of the myths she had been brought to believe: ‘that the white man never lied’” (57). Instead of the devices of cross-cultural juxtaposition or irony, Emecheta conveys a tone of righteous anger in this chapter. Adah’s identity in this scene is uncompromising and undivided: “She remembered her mother. Ma would have torn the fatty tissues of this woman into shreds” (56). In the description of Adah’s aborted attempt at venting her anger at Trudy, all of the rage of being colonized seems to be concentrated into an unmitigated disdain of British culture: “She [Trudy] belonged to the nation of people who had introduced ‘law and order’” (72). Adah’s strength at this point is apparent and for a moment in time, she is not an exile from her own culture but “an angry Ibo woman” (72).

Adah has experienced the culture shock of realizing that Britons have severe failings and she has suffered this knowledge where she is most vulnerable, through her children. In addition to this shock Adah must continue to endure Francis’s irresponsibility in the face of their

confrontation with discrimination from other Nigerians. The family are evicted by their Yoruba landlord. Adah rationalizes this action in terms of ethnic jealousy. It is interesting to note that she never wonders whether Francis has been disruptive or whether the children's noise is a problem since the other Nigerian tenants foster their children. Literary references to the Bible are sometimes used ironically as when Francis and Adah are unable to obtain housing at a time when Adah is eight months pregnant. Adah begins telling Francis the story of Mary and Joseph and their lack of accommodations in Bethlehem in order to control her anxiety and to terminate the oppressive silence between them. His response to this anxious tirade is to cruelly threaten her: "you'll soon be forced to look for your own Joseph" (85). Later when Adah is in labour Francis ignores her needs and quotes Biblical verses to her. Thus the couple alternately quote Biblical literature to communicate and this proves extremely ineffectual and damaging to their relationship rather than helpful. Emecheta cleverly and paradoxically uses these dialogues demonstrating the ineffectiveness of Christianity for this exiled couple in replacing the traditional extended family supports for them.

The couple eventually find a room in the home of a racially mixed couple, the Nobles (as outlined in the chapter entitled "The Ghetto"). Differences between African and colonial cultures are highlighted in the description of the Nobles as seen through Adah's eyes. The elderly Nigerian Pa Noble, Sue his much younger white British wife and their many children are viewed in a harsh light by Adah. Again Adah's character is infused with pride in her traditional culture and shame at her husband and countrymen's negative assimilation. Dagmar Schmidt-Grozinger comments on Francis's attempts to cope as an unselfconscious Igbo man with the expectations of immigrant behaviour: "On the one hand his aim is to uphold their African tradition when

questions of their private lives are concerned, and on the other hand he anticipates English standards” (115). During this period Adah is acquiescent to her traditional culture. She ends up having more children because Francis sabotages her attempt at birth control, as he finds its use culturally offensive to his male ego.

In *Head Above Water* Emecheta comments that she recognizes the sociological influences in *Second-Class Citizen* (104). In “The Ghetto” sociological diction mingles in a somewhat uneasy manner with clever and ironic descriptions of eccentric characters like Pa Noble. In describing the degradation of Pa Noble in his work before he retired from an injury, Emecheta seems to be diagnosing and telling the reader rather than describing and showing:

Nobody knew what actually went wrong, but Mr. Noble started to act like a child.  
Who said that society makes us? Was it Durkheim? (90)

In contrast to this jarring passage, Emecheta astutely and humorously describes Mr. Noble in a style resonant of Charles Dickens: “He had on layers and layers of clothes, vests, shirts and old jumpers and on top of it all an old grandpa, God-forsaken coat with sagging pockets” (98). The application of two dissimilar discourses to one subject (Mr. Noble) is a simpler task than the dialogue of many voices which Emecheta crafts to convey her protagonist’s childbirth experience.<sup>7</sup>

The sixteen pages of “Role Acceptance” consist of the juxtaposition of two and at times three voices in Adah’s mind. At the start of the chapter Adah is having “a morning stretch” (103). By the chapter’s end, just previous to dropping off to sleep, Adah thinks how big and hairy her newborn baby appeared and “[t]hank[s] God they got him out in time” (119). The central dynamic consists of Adah’s subjective experience of labour with her third child, and her poignant

scheming to get Francis's sympathy and the help she needs to get through confinement, take care of the other children and pay the bills.

Sad, and feeling very sorry for herself, as she usually did on such days, she dragged herself up envying her husband who was still having a good snore. She felt like waking him up, when a piece of humanity inside her gave her a gentle kick. It seemed to be saying to her, "What do you think you're doing eh?" This gentle push was followed by arrow-like punches. One of the punches was so intense that she was jolted into reality. (103)

Adah considers the possibility of eliciting sympathy from Francis by screaming as she waits for a bus for work during a transit strike. She gradually realizes that she is in the early stages of labour. Ironically as she is debating how to coerce her husband to help her, rather than abandon and abuse her during her labour, a continuous dialogue is going on in her head about Francis and the world and her previous deliveries which were assisted by her mother-in-law. After Adah returns home due to the strike, Francis lectures her on being a Biblically virtuous woman. Emecheta now interposes one external and two internal monologues in this scene: one monologue describes the gradually intensifying labour subjectively and intermittently experienced, and is reported matter of factly; the other voice is Adah's somewhat cynical, silent observation of Francis while scheming to get help for her upcoming struggle to give birth. Francis persistently delivers the third monologue consisting of fundamentalist Christian rhetoric obviously disdained by Adah but faithfully reproduced by the narrator. As Francis rambles on Adah thinks:

At least the joy of his listening to his own voice would let him leave her alone to ponder what it was she was going to do about this baby, whose legs seemed to be kicking not her front, as other babies did, but her ribs. This was making it difficult for her to breathe. (108)

Finally Adah grabs her scarf and sets out "hurried, wobbling, to Dr. Hudson's surgery," with

Francis yelling for her to stop so he can read her a passage from *The Truth Shall Make You Free* (110). The truth for Adah is the truth of her body which keeps insinuating itself on her consciousness. By grounding this passage in the rhythms of Adah's powerful and practised labouring body, Emecheta gradually demonstrates the limitations of language for describing what the body is experiencing. She concurrently shows the weakness of Francis's verbalizing.

Once Adah arrives at Dr. Hudson's clinic she is experiencing particularly distressing labour pains due, Adah thinks to herself, to the position of the baby. The pains are described as "those hot ones that make a mad person of any woman" (111). This statement sets the context for the astute observations and scathing criticisms we are privy to in Adah's thoughts. A "No Smoking" sign with a graphic of a woman with lung cancer sends Adah off into a silent monologue about Adam and Eve and the disproportionate blame and suffering placed on Eve. When she sees Dr. Hudson, who wants her to go to a hospital to have her baby, she refuses but chooses silence rather than trying to explain, thinking: "The tale would be too long, and the telling of it would make her cry" (114). Continuing home Adah remains silent, when her midwives, summoned in haste by Dr. Hudson, ride past her on their bicycles looking for her.

The reader continues to experience the suspense of Adah's inner dialogue accompanying her labour. Throughout, as the dialogue continues, outside "reality" reaches out to the reader only as it does to Adah, in tiny reality bites, and often at an objectified distance. The reader ascertains that the midwives find Adah bleeding; she is rushed to the hospital and an emergency caesarian section is carried out with the delivery of Adah's third baby. Adah hovers between life and death and is only semi-conscious for several days, unable to speak, and is kept alive by intravenous and blood transfusions. The reader's access to this information is in bits and pieces as Adah enters

and leaves consciousness in her own house, the ambulance, operating room and hospital ward. The reader is shown by the barrage of useless questions directed at Adah in the face of her incisive labour how irrelevant such communication is compared to the insistence of bodily experience.

“Can’t you read English?” asked the older midwife with the white hair ... Adah did not want to be regarded as illiterate, so she told her that she could. Had Adah not read the instructions that she was to call at the onset of pains? ... “Rook, rook, she’s breeding,” gasped the young nurse with the face like an O. Adah tried to puzzle out what this statement could mean ... Her pains did not get more acute, but all of a sudden she could take no more.... The room started going round and round in all the colours of the rainbow. Francis now had turned into Lucifer ... He was telling her that she was being punished for not waiting to read *The Truth Shall Make You Free*. Then the voices of the two women floated in ... one finger, two fingers. Then in came Francis again ... She heard the bells, the ambulance bells. But they jingled as if they were Peter’s bunch of keys ... (117)

This stylistically important passage is experimental and illustrates what Olga Kenyon calls “the imaginary order [which] is that of the mother” (7). In this type of writing Kenyon explains that although there is “an apparent lack of logical structure, the rhythms of the body and the unconscious break through conventional social meaning” (7). Its power comes from Emecheta’s ability to juxtapose important events (high-risk birthing of the baby) with trivial details (the sign in Dr. Hudson’s office, the noise of the midwives’ bicycles). The insinuating drama of Adah’s labour transforms the domination of Francis’s endless sermons into ineffectual background noise. The accumulation of detail and the absence of self-consciousness on the part of Adah, build tension and create sympathy for Adah at the same time. On one hand the universal, high drama of birth and danger is being played out, yet Adah’s sensibility, her ironic view of life, her burden of traditional Nigerian and Christian guilt towards Francis, and most of all, her intense connection to her other children provide the context for the drama, all of which is

presented in this dialogic style.

Jonathan White cites well-known science fiction writer, Ursula Le Guin, as challenging women to write about the part of their experience which is not shared with men:

Experiences that are only women's, like childbirth, have been described a thousand times, mostly in novels by men. These descriptions have nothing to do with the actual experience. Generally, I don't think men in our culture want to hear from women about childbirth ... A woman's story has a different shape, different words, different rhythms. (White 82)

Emecheta's experimental writing, particularly in the labour and birthing sequence of the "Role Acceptance" chapter, is an important step towards meeting Le Guin's challenge.

Gender issues are played out during the dramatic internal labour and birthing dialogue and in the chapter entitled "Learning the Rules." Emecheta juxtaposes visions of Francis as Lucifer, with the literal voice of the surgeon experienced by Adah as "the big man," almost Christ-like (119). The reader is led to have confidence in the narrator's description of Adah's hallucinations. Her lucid conviction that the handsome surgeon who operated on her "knew how to handle his knife" convinced Adah that she was not going to die (123). The images of benevolent and benign paternalism stand in stark contrast to each other, but women are valorized in this passage. Adah, lying in the ward surrounded by the buzz of pre- and post-partum women, thinks that "these women are all happy and free" (120). The benevolent male surgeon's skill saves Adah's life, but the "kind women in the ward" convince Adah "it was worth struggling to hold on to this life" (121). Since Adah cannot speak for some time, she observes and ponders the relationships she sees played out before her in the ward. The birthing passage is significant for its absence of any mention of Adah's own Nigerian traditions. She is alienated from anything familiar and feels empty and alone. Francis's limitations are emphasized by the seemingly perfect

men who frequently visit their wives with abundant gifts and affection. Adah feels her life meagre alongside of those other women. Nancy Bazin notes in her article about African women's critique of traditional marriages such as Adah's that "the ideal of more egalitarian relationships" emerges from their writing ("Weight" 183). Despite Adah's envy of the companionable marital relationships she sees, Emecheta again cleverly introduces in the description of the Greek woman, the colonialism ever present in British society. In describing all of the lovely clothes the Greek woman "in number eight" has ("ten housecoats all with beautiful frills and edgings"), she adds "she sewed for Marks and Spencer's, so she had a great many sub-standard clothes which they allowed her to keep" (127). There is an important subtext to this description and one suspects that Adah is aware of it. The Greek woman is an immigrant like Adah and is probably working for subsistence wages for this huge British chain and is "allowed" to keep these clothes because she is being exploited. The opportunity for Adah to observe her fellow maternity mates from various socioeconomic backgrounds, and her ability to transcend surface observations is one reason she is able to transform this experience.

Adah clearly feels that being a scientific subject, another positive statistic for the surgeon to parade in front of his students, is a poor substitute for being treated as an individual with respect and love. Adah's relationship to the surgeon serves as an allegory for Adah's postcolonial relationship to England. She appreciates what he has done for her but recognizes that she cannot develop as his dependent patient because he does not see her as a person—only a case. Similarly Nigerians cannot develop fully while dependent, colonial subjects, however benevolent British governance appears to be.

It is in this hospital setting that Adah experiences alienation, a stranger in a strange land,

an exile. Francis, she realizes, is in another world totally removed from her and blind to even her basic survival needs. The tensions between the gratitude Adah feels for her life and for the kindnesses of strangers on the ward versus the humiliation to which she has been exposed in being told to buy the required nightgown, being a subject for the surgeon's rounds, and comparing her marriage to the idealized relationships she sees around her, bring about an epiphany: "Here she was in a foreign country, with no single friend, except her children ..." (133).

The sudden recognition of her children and their role as significant individuals in her life with their potential for the human support she craves is perhaps the most important revelation Adah achieves. Her subsequent behaviour is explained by this moment which Emecheta emphasizes by setting it in italic type:

*Yes, I have my children. They are only babies, but babies become people, men and women. I can switch my love to them. Leave this person. No, live with him as long as it is convenient. No longer. (133)*

After this insight Adah realizes what she is looking for: "She had to act for herself. She was looking for a home. She has never had one since Pa died years ago ..." (133). Adah re-evaluates and, instead of striving to appropriate the ideals of the western romantic relationships she sees around her in this alien environment, or fleeing to her traditional relationship with Francis, she opts to act on her own unique and significant moral insights.

In the community of women on the ward, Adah begins consciously "learning the rules" by which to live. In similar fashion to *The Bride Price*, there are things Adah must learn which come from her relationship with other women. As Christina Davis points out, before coming to London "Adah always preferred the counsel of males," but in London she "leans primarily on

women as confidantes or to teach her the ropes ..." (19). In the hospital Adah has the opportunity to live for a while in the context of caring<sup>8</sup> where she is forced at first to observe and is shown by the other women small life-affirming ways; she experiences compassion towards some of the other women and she has time to think about her own situation. Following this hospital experience, Adah's heroically successful attempts at what Davis calls "social integration" are "less a question of conformity than a search to define what will make her happy on her own terms" (18).

Although Adah returns to Francis and gives him another chance, she finally realizes that she cannot develop within such an abusive relationship. She decides that the children's needs take precedence over Francis's needs. In "Applying the Rules" Adah learns to avoid unnecessary guilt about Francis and becomes critical of his internalized racism. Later she returns to some of the lessons she learned about life in the hospital ward and this supports her resolve to change. Adah skillfully evaluates the positive and negative images of the two cultures of which she is a part. This is closely followed by a determination that her children are going to be different than their father: "They were going to be proud of being black, a black of a different breed" (154). Following a terrible fight over birth control which becomes public, Adah decides tearfully that the marriage is over. She draws strength from her own private form of Christian spirituality and from colleagues at work. Adah begins to think of Francis's abusive behaviour "like the demands of a wicked child who enjoys torturing a live animal given to him as a pet" (168).

Adah's belief in the primacy of children is an Igbo belief which, combined with the knowledge of Britain's socialist state benefits, empowers her. She takes care of herself during her next pregnancy and avails herself of Britain's child benefits and gradually dissociates herself

from Francis. As she sees her maternity benefits running out, having maintained her health mentally and physically for the first time throughout her pregnancy, Adah remembers her old dream and wonders if it might now be possible to write and she tells herself: “Write; go on and do it” (180).

Near the end of their marriage, Francis becomes violent. Adah copes with this in a similar fashion to the way she coped with Francis’s behaviour during her labour and delivery: she focuses elsewhere, on what is important to the existence of her children and herself. Adah’s approach to a difficult, violent, domestic situation is reflected again in the writing style. The narrator describes Francis’s behaviour in objective, non-emotional language which has the effect of distancing the protagonist from the action. When Adah plans to leave Francis, “noise and fighting is so great that the police had to be called in. The landlady apologised later ...” (187). Later when Francis breaks into their new rooms and Adah is aware that she might lose her accommodations, she is described as responding calmly and reasonably: “Adah nodded but reminded him ...” (189). When Francis warns her that in Igbo tradition there is no such thing as divorce or separation, Adah still maintains her calm: “No Francis you broke the laws of our people first, not me. And remember Francis, I am not your mother. I am me ...” (189). Very few details of the couple’s conflict are described by the narrator, who informs the reader that “[w]hat followed is too horrible to print” (189). The reader is given only glimpses and the response of others to the couple’s fighting as clues to the situation. In the last three pages of the novel Emecheta moves the plot quickly through a court scene using dialogue judiciously to describe Francis’s denial of parentage and Adah’s eloquent promise of support for the children.

In *Head Above Water* Emecheta records her feelings about ending this novel: “*Second-*

*Class Citizen* was nearing its end, but because it is an autobiographical work I did not know that then. I was not quite sure where to stop” (104). Emecheta’s choice for an ending of the novel is the end of Adah’s marriage to Francis. At the same time Emecheta also introduces a new beginning. Adah, coming from the divorce court, despairing and alone in the streets of London, hears her pet name being called by a childhood friend from her village: “It was like Fate intervening. It was like a story one might read in a true story magazine” (192). This choice of a conclusion to her fictionalized life story to date may be a foreshadowing of the type of fiction Emecheta saw herself writing and in fact did write in her next novel, *The Bride Price*. On the other hand, it may also represent recidivist tendencies—re-placing herself into a traditional, conservative, feminine script/genre in retreat from the border-crossing genre she has just adopted and completed.

Emecheta’s description of what her autobiographical protagonist, Adah, needs in order to write echoes Adrienne Rich’s comments about writing: “for a character or action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive” (*What* 525). Rich, like Walker, sees the demands of child care as a barrier to writing. Since their needs come first, children can irretrievably break the flow of a writer’s thought. Emecheta found, however, that poverty and marital violence were greater barriers for her. Her children provided the motivation for Emecheta to go on. As she notes in *Head Above Water*, working on *Second-Class Citizen* “was an important lifeline for me” (94). Emecheta often dedicates her novels to members of her family or her extended family, but this one is dedicated to her five children, “without whose sweet background noises this book would not have been written” (6). Walker notes the significance of this in an essay on Emecheta, “A Writer Because of, Not In Spite of, Her

Children,” and Walker suspects that “the dedication might camouflage the author’s unadmitted maternal guilt,” but decides this is not the case (67). As Davis points out in “Mother and Writer: Means of Empowerment in the Work of Buchi Emecheta,” the character Adah’s (Emecheta’s fictional double) “decision to put her children first is a crucial one because it is pivotal to her own identity” (18). Emecheta feels emotionally attached to her creative works and she sees parallels between the births of her children and the launching of her novels.

Emecheta describes the completion of her novels in very physical terms. For her, the publication of a book is more than symbolically akin to birth; it is one which she handles like the births of her children:

I have always compared the feelings I have for my books on their first arrival to the ones I used to have after going through child labour and then being left for a few minutes with my brand new baby. I don’t know whether other mothers do this: I always made a little speech to my new child.... Then I would strip the baby completely naked to make sure it was perfect. And when I was perfectly sure that all was well, I would then thank the Lord and smell my child.... a new child has that special natural smell ... It is like that of forest fire, mingled with rain and human sweat. I love it, ... And somehow in my imagination, my new books smell like that. (*Head* 69-70)

With encouragement Adah decides to pursue her dream of writing. Her private, inner debate with herself about her writing process has a western focus: “She could not write in any African language, so it must be English although English was not her mother tongue. But she could not write those big long twisting words” (183). Even in terms of subject matter she decides that she needs to study sociology in order to learn more about people.

When it comes to her motivation and sensibility, however, Adah looks to Africa for inspiration.<sup>9</sup> When Adah tells Francis she wants to write, he replies, “you keep on forgetting that you are woman and that you are black” (184). Adah’s response is to inform Francis about her

writing foremother, Flora Nwapa. Adah, just like her creator, calls upon both oral tradition and modern African writers for her inspiration.

In *Writing A Woman's Life* Carolyn Heilbrun notes that “[s]afety and closure which have always been held out to women as the ideals of female destiny, are not places of adventure, or experience, or life” (20). Safety and closure are not offered to readers of *Second-Class Citizen*. Emecheta has, however, generously offered her life, and as she says in the paradoxical ending to *Second-Class Citizen*, “it was like a story” (192). Story making enables Emecheta to resolve or accept many of her life’s trials in *Second-Class Citizen*, and similarly she says of *The Joys of Motherhood*: “In a way that book, like *Second-Class Citizen*, made me accept my lot” (*Head* 225).

## **Reassessing Motherhood**

### *The Joys of Motherhood*

In *Second-Class Citizen* Emecheta articulates her maternal motivation for writing and traces her role as a daughter, wife and mother. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, published four years later, Emecheta enters and explores parts of motherhood held to be taboo. To do this she sets her novel in the early 1950s in Ibuza and Lagos, and her protagonist Nnu Ego, motherless from infancy, first experiences childlessness and then dedicates a thankless life to her many children dying alone and bitter. The reception of this novel has been primarily positive.<sup>10</sup> Critics who received Emecheta’s former works negatively find merit in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Afam Ebeogu accuses Emecheta of being iconoclastic at the sacrifice of good writing. In his essay, “Enter the Iconoclast: Buchi Emecheta and the Igbo Culture,” Ebeogu suggests that such a stance

leads to a misrepresentation of culture and predicts that the “culture will sit in judgement over her” (84). It is somewhat ironic that Ebeogu describes *The Joys of Motherhood* as Emecheta’s only work that meets his criteria of aesthetic value. He writes that in “[The] *Joys of Motherhood* the author exercises a great deal of restraint, careful planning and commitment to the demands of fictional expertise which takes precedence over personal, authorial prejudices” (92). Her touching description of the motivation for and the process of writing *The Joys of Motherhood* gives important insights into Emecheta as a woman and as a novelist and emphatically contradicts Ebeogu’s belief in a dispassionate construction. Emecheta vividly describes her rapid-fire writing of this very personal, autobiographically motivated novel about the contradictions of motherhood, and her process demonstrates the irony in Ebeogu’s comments. In *Head Above Water* Emecheta writes of an argument with her eldest daughter, Chiedu. As a result of this argument about Emecheta’s refusal to send Chiedu to the school she requested, her daughter reacted violently in a way she never had before, breaking a window and leaving home. Emecheta, shocked at her daughter’s violent response, describes how she felt at the time:

... then I saw everything I spent my whole life building collapsing like a pack of cards ... This type of violence had never occurred in our family before.... I wanted to think, I wanted to reassess my life, I wanted to take stock. I could do it only on the typewriter. I banged away the whole of Christmas, the whole of January 1977, and by the end of that month, almost six weeks after Chiedu left, *The Joys of Motherhood* was finished. (*Head* 223-24)

Ebeogu’s idea that any cultural critique is a betrayal and that as Emecheta matures as a novelist she will “give the African feminist case a fillip” seems ethnocentric as well as chauvinist (93). The result of Emecheta’s six weeks of obsessive writing is perhaps a somewhat iconoclastic work, since in this novel Emecheta does attack the deeply established principle that a woman

should live only for her children. On the other hand, Elaine Savory Fido insists that though the mother may be absent physically from Emecheta's novels, "she affects the very words which we read, and to forget her means that the reading of the text is deeply distorted" (333). An awareness of the rather unusual context in which Emecheta wrote this novel casts light on the mother-daughter relationships within *The Joys of Motherhood*.

*The Joys of Motherhood* is set in a time when colonization had minimal impact in the rural areas of Nigeria but imposed greatly on Igbo traditions in the large cities, because in such places as Lagos, the economy was evolving to serve the empire. The novel follows the protagonist, Nnu Ego, from her almost idyllic pastoral conception and childhood through her move to Lagos where she has to learn new rules of life, then back to ignominious death by the roadside, alone in her rural homeland. The omniscient narrator follows the protagonist's struggle for understanding as to why the joys of motherhood provide total life meaning for Igbo womankind. Bazin describes how, as Nnu Ego participates in, and perpetuates the male directed ethos of her society narrowly focused on producing male children, "she is angry more and more frequently" ("Weight" 186).

Although Emecheta's storytelling skills are demonstrated in this novel, readers seem more confident in the narrator and in the veracity of this story. Presumably seen as a cultural resource on motherhood in Igbo society, the novel is often taught in anthropology courses. Ebeogu, for example, feels that this is one novel which Emecheta does not use as a vehicle to put forth her "propagandist" views on feminism (93). He finds that in this novel "chauvinism is conveyed to the reader fictionally rather than as the subject of mere authorial assertions"; "the creator provides a fictional justification" (92). Ebeogu has faith in this narrative because of its

distance from “reality” provided by the conventions of “good” fiction writing. Many other readers, on the other hand, read it as an anthropological treatise. Both of these audiences, one indigenous and the other western, might add depth and immediacy to their reading if they appreciated the context mentioned above.

Emecheta’s powerful interrogation of her cultural heritage<sup>11</sup> which contributed to the fight with her daughter is echoed in her protagonist’s question near the end of *The Joys of Motherhood*: “But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man’s world, which we women will always help to build” (187). In contrast to this questioning of her traditions, after she has lost her first child and is pregnant with another, Nnu Ego fantasizes about returning to Ibuza and prays, “Please God, let this child stay with me and fulfil all these my future hopes and joys” (79). Nnu Ego further asks herself, “were they not in a white man’s world where it was the duty of the father to provide for his family?” (81). She decides that losing her baby is her fault for “trying to be traditional in a modern urban setting” (81). The decision to avoid attempts to be economically independent and to focus her entire life on her children results in Nnu Ego and her children starving for part of their lives and in her total sacrifice and erasure of herself. This theme of women’s relationships to one another and to their daughters and its significance for personal identity adds complexity to the broader theme which Bazin describes as women’s imprisonment by “the patriarchal glorification of motherhood” (186). It also opens up the novel to its contemporary subversive possibilities.

Emecheta’s critique of colonial economics is also a critique of capitalism, of hierarchies which devalue certain parts of society in order to elevate others. Margaret Daymond tracks the

use of laughter and silence in *The Joys of Motherhood*, demonstrating that Nnu Ego's refusal to bless the shrine built in her name to tribal motherhood represents resistance because a refusal to speak or answer, in other words silence, is the only form of resistance allowed to her. Daymond explains: "This woman's final silence joins her earlier laughter as being an example of the small but vital way in which her being can be expressed within—but not on terms set by—male language" (286).

It is ironic that Emecheta's audiences have praised this novel for both narrative and anthropological precision. Or perhaps it is witness to her ability as a storyteller that she could write convincingly of her protagonist, a poor village woman analyzing her situation with such sociological phrases as "risky lifestyle," "sole provider," "useful role," "a modern urban setting" (81). The success of this novel, which is dedicated to all mothers, is now tinged as well with poignant irony since Chiedu, the daughter who sparked the emotion firing Emecheta's writing of it, has since died. Perhaps the best description of *The Joys of Motherhood* can be found on the cover of the 1988 Heinemann edition, written by John Updike: "a graceful, touching, ironically titled tale."<sup>12</sup>

### **A Two-Spirited Igbo Woman at the Hem of Life**

#### *Kehinde*

*Kehinde*, published in 1994 five years after Emecheta's previous novel, is set in modern England and Nigeria during the oil boom in the late 1970s and 1980s. In this novel Emecheta addresses new issues while still fearlessly exposing the injustice and chauvinism in both western and Nigerian societies. One major difference from her other novels is the apparent absence of

explicitly autobiographical material. The novel, however, contains many intertextual references, particularly to *Second-Class Citizen*. As in her other novels, with the exception of *Double Yoke*, Emecheta writes from a predominantly woman-centered sensibility. She experiments with language, frequently using untranslated dialogue in Pidgin and words in Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. These characteristics suggest that she is directing her writing to a double audience.<sup>13</sup>

Emecheta's first major publisher was Allison and Busby. Margaret Busby, her former publisher, reviewed *Kehinde* in the *Guardian Weekly* in April 1994, summarizing Emecheta's career to date, calling her an "outspoken and prolific storyteller who has resolutely mined her own experience to illumine the complexities of African womanhood" (29). Busby agrees with past reviewers in describing Emecheta's plots as "simple, some might say simplistic moral tales" (29). One might contend with this analysis on the basis of the issues addressed in this novel. Issues such as abortion, polygamy and neo-colonialism are difficult to resolve and tie into neat little moral tales. Gay Wilentz, reviewing the novel in *Ms*, emphasized the culture shock experienced by the protagonist after returning to Nigeria from a seventeen-year absence.

Emecheta might be receptive to her novel's classification as "young adult." Charlotte Bruner, in her essay "The Other Audience: Children and the Example of Buchi Emecheta," reminds readers of the fact that "[i]n traditional Africa stories belong to everyone" (129). She notes similarities between Emecheta's adult and adolescent fiction, emphasizing the use of autobiographical material in each.

Early commentators on *Kehinde* have failed to mention the intercontinental settings of which Emecheta makes maximum use. The international influences on this work are nicely illustrated by the "Acknowledgments" page. People thanked include the names of women in

Pittsburgh, USA; a contact at the Evangelical Church in Emecheta's home town in Nigeria; and Emecheta's editor in Barbados.

The structure of this novel stands in contrast to the loose structure of *Second-Class Citizen*. It is a short novel of 141 pages divided into twenty-one chapters. Emecheta casts the plot tensions succinctly in the first chapter with Kehinde announcing an unexpected pregnancy to her husband, Albert, on the same day as he receives a letter from his family at home urging him to return to Nigeria. The middle-class London setting in which the family of four live is described briefly but vividly. Emecheta uses dialogue to advantage in *Kehinde* and, unlike *The Bride Price*, cultural explanations are often supplied by the dialogue, and Yoruba, Pidgin, Igbo or Hausa terms are explained in a glossary at the end of the novel. This technique works well; however, there is an occasional word left out of the glossary which readers unacquainted with the languages (especially Nigerian Pidgin) might find confusing. For example, the word "Shakara" (129) is a Yoruba word used in Pidgin to mean "proud," but this is not explained in the glossary. Fortunately these omissions are rare and do not interfere significantly with meaning. This may indicate that the Nigerian audience is a priority for Emecheta to target.

The structure works well for most of the novel. Emecheta seems to be able to develop her themes and the pace is comfortable. However, near the end of the novel, as in several previous works, considerable content seems to get jammed in. An element of didacticism enters into the novel. In an exchange with Joshua, Kehinde's son who has returned to England, the dialogue manages to cover a lecture on AIDS as well as a kindly reminder of Kehinde's own rights and the rights of homosexual and unmarried men. The structural weakness of placing important material briefly at the end of a novel is particularly disappointing in this passage. Emecheta's character is

presenting a new feminist sexual ethic. It would seem that the importance of the character transformation merits more development and less brevity. When Emecheta continues to use dialogue, this works to some extent, but she changes tone, and the reader may get the idea that Kehinde is trying desperately to convince herself of what she is saying. For example, she murmurs to her Taiwo, “[c]laiming my right does not make me less of a mother, not less of a woman. If anything it makes me more human” (141). The content of the last few pages of the novel feels too much, too obvious, too late. In the final sentence we discover that Kehinde is now integrated. “‘Now we are one,’ the living Kehinde said to the spirit of her long dead Taiwo” (141). This conclusion may be more acceptable to an Igbo audience familiar with the spiritual concepts involved with chi, but a western audience might feel more comfort with an open-ended conclusion considering the gravity of the questions asked in the novel. Again, one must consider the preferred audience being addressed.

The intertextual references to Emecheta’s own works are interesting in *Kehinde*. The character of Kehinde portrayed at the beginning of the novel resembles Emecheta’s friends described in *Head Above Water*. Certain of her expatriate friends were disdainful of her independence and separation from her husband and they flaunt both their wealth and their togetherness in her presence. This is exactly what Kehinde does to her friends when she and Albert are living their middle-class life in London. She is particularly disdainful of Mary Eikwu who closely resembles Adah, the protagonist of *Second-Class Citizen*. Mary Eikwu is a Nigerian who has separated from her husband, is taking her degree, advocating women’s causes and raising her children on her own. Mary Eikwu is introduced and mentioned throughout *Kehinde*; however, she remains a peripheral figure.

As Kehinde's character evolves and changes she recalls other woman besides Mary who she has judged harshly. A character transformation occurs and is narrated in the later chapters of the novel, when Kehinde has returned to England. This change in Kehinde is signalled by the questions she asks. After the Arab sheikh in the hotel where she works has humiliated her by demanding that she remove her clothes, Kehinde is troubled and asks herself if this is "God's way of reminding her how women judge and condemn each other?" (132). In this novel Emecheta interrogates and contradicts material from her other novels, adding richness and also a subversive level of meaning. Florence Stratton derides the readings of critics, particularly from the west, who suggest that Emecheta offers education (western education) as a panacea for the problems of her heroines (110). This is explicitly questioned in the novel. Kehinde, in consultation with Melissa at the job centre, asks, "Has education helped us at all?" (134). One suspects that the answer from the young British job counsellor rings with irony for Kehinde:

Oh yes, education is helping. If you haven't got a degree, you wouldn't have been considered for this three-day a week job. There won't be much male competition there. Most men and younger people want full-time work. But it's not demeaning work. And you can be sure you won't be asked to take your clothes off. (134)

In a similar vein, Kehinde's friend Duro with whom she works at the hotel frankly tells her: "An educated black person in a responsible job is too much of a threat. White people don't feel comfortable in their presence" (125).

In *Second-Class Citizen* Adah and Francis experienced discrimination from their Nigerian landlord and other tenants because they would not place their children in foster care, but kept and raised them on their own. In *Kehinde*, the children of Albert and Kehinde are placed in foster care. We learn this incidentally when they are to go back to Nigeria to attend boarding school:

“Apart from their stay with a foster parent when they were little, they had never travelled anywhere” (45). In this sense Emecheta’s protagonist in this novel does all of the things Adah (the author’s double) refuses to do.

Using an omniscient voice with one primary feminine sensibility flowing through a complicated landscape of other more muted voices, the narrative style of *Kehinde* is a familiar one for Emecheta. Here she breaks from the omniscient narration and effectively writes in the first-person voice in four different chapters using inner dialogue, dreams (under anaesthesia and sleep), and letters to change voice.

Emecheta creates an imaginative prenatal world. Kehinde falls into a sort of daydream or trance-like state lulled by the car ride to the abortion clinic. The critical voice of her chi induces a memory of their prenatal life in the womb. After the twin dies, while both babies were still in the womb, Kehinde recalls: “I clung to her ... I called her ... I cried for her in my now lonely tomb” (18). Although chapter six is titled “The Dream,” the passage in which Kehinde remembers playing as a child occurs when she is anaesthetized. Dialogue is used to condense Kehinde’s feelings of confusion about her mother and cultural attitudes about parental roles. After describing the administration of the anaesthetic, the reader immediately enters the world of Kehinde’s childhood: “Feeling ... fear, clutching my heart. Swooning noises in my ears. Children’s voices as we play in the street ...” (28). After this effective passage and in the same chapter, the protagonist wakes from anaesthesia but then, still in first-person voice, falls into a post-anaesthetic dream state. This dream performs a function similar to the dream in *The Joys of Motherhood* in that it contextualizes a particular pregnancy, giving it significance. In this novel, Kehinde has just had an abortion and learns in the dream that the fetus was to have been her

reincarnated father. “He was coming to look after you because he feels guilty about not looking after you last time”; significantly Kehinde’s mother instructs her in the dream that “You have to learn to live without him” (31). In this dream Kehinde’s mother also forbids her to die, saying, “Go back, my daughter. Your time is not yet” (31). In the same chapter when Kehinde does wake to go home, Moriammo’s humour provides needed comic relief after the dream drama described above: “Now I am here. What do I find, enh? You shouting for your papa. Wake up, my sister” (31). Albert provides a medical explanation for the life-death drama in the dream: “‘You lost a lot of blood’ ...” (32). This passage is a challenging piece of writing. The Igbo spiritual concept of chi [personal god] is introduced, and for a western audience the writing has to be convincing since such an audience lacks the knowledge of reincarnation which may be taken for granted by an Igbo audience. Another dream sequence occurs when Kehinde is experiencing culture shock back in Nigeria. After discovering that Albert has taken a new wife and has started another family, and after meeting many of her relatives and friends at a party held for her, “[Kehinde] fell at once into a deep sleep, visited by fragments of the past, as if, in her depleted state, her spirit was seeking solace in its own beginnings” (75). Emecheta cleverly uses this dream in continuity with the childhood one in chapter six and fleshes out Kehinde’s origins. The letter written in the first person is sent to Kehinde’s friend Moriammo in London and serves to move the plot along. Moriammo sends Kehinde the money to return to England, where she can be more independent both financially and culturally.

Whereas *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Bride Price* address colonialism, *Kehinde* cleverly and subversively exposes neo-colonialism in both Nigeria and Britain and shows associations between them. In the novel neo-colonialism influences interpersonal relationships

and religious beliefs. Contemporary Christianity and traditional Igbo spirituality, especially the concept of chi, provide counterpoints for each other. Kehinde has been influenced by her twin, Taiwo, throughout her life. This is so even though Taiwo is stillborn; as Aunt Nnebogo, who raised her, explains, “Her second and her chi are one and the same” (21). Taiwo or Kehinde’s chi is present in Kehinde’s life in the form of an inner voice, a subversive or rebellious voice. When Kehinde is alone or has a “feeling of being marginal to everyone else’s lives” this voice predominates (46). At one point, trying to dispel the voice, Kehinde loudly sings the hymn “Sweet sacrament of peace” (46). Emecheta is being consistent in introducing a traditional Igbo concept of spirituality in this novel. She is forthright in her critique of her culture but her body of work as a whole leaves little doubt about her rootedness in her culture and confidence in finding her identity there. Florence Stratton points out that critics often “elide indigenous African feminism, as well as African women’s acts of resistance to their oppression both as women and as Africans” (110).

In *Morning Yet on Creation Day* Chinua Achebe devotes a chapter to “Chi in Igbo Cosmology” in which he puzzles over the two distinct meanings of chi in Igbo. The one referred to in *Kehinde* is “often translated as god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit double, etc.” (159). This meaning is central to the culture, yet is ambiguous. The other meaning is day or sun. In Achebe’s opinion one needs to understand chi or one cannot “begin to make sense of the Igbo world-view” (160). Therefore, one can see that Emecheta does not choose traditional material for her novel at random. Achebe, in trying to explain chi in a literary fashion as opposed to a philosophical, linguistic or religious way, makes a connection with the sun. He notes that there is a ritual whereby a priest brings down the spirit of an individual from the face of the sun at

daybreak. This done, a shrine is built (160-61). This associates chi with the supreme Deity, Chukwu, who is in close communion with the sun. He notes too that Igbo people explain their world view not in rigid arguments but using myth and metaphor. Central to an understanding of chi is the importance of duality: “Whenever Something stands, Something Else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute” (Achebe 161). Although the chi is powerful, somewhat fatalistic and not to be ignored in a person’s life, Achebe points out that the Igbo world view is highly independent and individualistic. Therefore the complicated idea of chi also contains in it the concept of “every man as both unique creation and the work of a unique creator” (168). Emecheta does not need to appropriate or change her traditions in order to have her character come under the influence of her chi and to eventually become integrated and independent with the help of her chi.

Christianity plays a different role in this novel than traditional spirituality. One questions whether Christianity is deeply rooted in the lives of Albert and Kehinde. Albert tells his English and Pakistani co-workers when asked his religion, “Yes, I’m a Catholic and I’m about to commit a mortal sin” (14). Albert is referring to the abortion he is persuading Kehinde to have, but his English co-worker is too ethnocentric to think of such a thing. The Englishman responds: “Wharr? Are you going to kill us for voodoo?” (14). This is highly ironic because in fact it is traditional spiritual values which influence Kehinde’s feelings about the abortion. However, the Englishman is totally unacquainted with such concepts, yet feels that all Africans have some sort of voodoo beliefs and are not Christians. His own culture which “brought religion” to Africa has become so secular that he cannot even imagine a mortal sin anymore. Catholicism, so depicted, appears here to be colonial and almost extinct.

Emecheta’s depiction of African-based Christianity in the Evangelical church is more

complex but no less scathing. Rike, Albert's second wife, leans on the church for support whenever she is troubled. The church wolis (priests) provide support for a fee. Sometimes their consolation and solution to problems is somewhat insidious. In order to assure Albert's faithfulness to Rike, the wolis suggest that if he goes back to England and Kehinde, "he will die the death" (118). Rike's own mother is a priest in this church so Rike is doubly influenced, with little chance to think for herself. This passage appears to demonstrate a partnership between Christianity and certain Igbo traditions strengthening the chauvinism in each and doubly oppressing women. The eldest woli tells Rike to "[g]o on being a good and obedient wife, my daughter ... quiet, full of good works. God will reward you and the fruit of your womb" (119). This is a clever reference to the virgin image with Kehinde being set up as the whore. There is humour in the wolis' demand for payment: "In a low voice Rike's mother told her she should bring a white goat, without spot, twelve cans of milk, seven loaves of bread and a basket of assorted fruits" (119).

During the colonial period, Christianity played an active role in evoking compliance from colonized people. It was in close partnership with education and economic development. Emecheta's deconstruction of the role of Christianity in modern Nigeria clearly illustrates the neo-colonial role it is playing, particularly towards women.

Bruce King comments on Emecheta's style, that "she has adopted an increasing range of tones ... including a highly emotional, almost expressionist handling of such themes as humiliation, dignity and self-assertion" (203). In her past fiction Emecheta has not used a great deal of figurative language. In *Kehinde* she does weave two images throughout the work, creating a unifying effect. Both images relate to identity and are applied cross-culturally; the most obvious

is that of two-in-one, the twin of Kehinde which she carries within her. Since the twin Taiwo is also Kehinde's chi, this image is more complex for reasons already mentioned. However, the presence of Taiwo adds dimension to Kehinde and moderates her drive for self-definition, making it seem less westernized and more appropriate to Emecheta's African sensibility.

Doubles are used at the beginning of the novel more than at the end. Albert and Kehinde are a couple; they have two children. Albert has one close friend at work, Prahbu, and Kehinde also has her close workmate, Mariammo, a Nigerian. In early flashback scenes to Kehinde's youth she always includes her Taiwo in her daily life, even sharing food with her imaginary sister. By the end of the novel, however, Kehinde is independent in the house, refusing to defer to her son. The last line of the novel is a statement by Kehinde: "'Now we are one,' the living Kehinde said to the spirit of her long dead Taiwo" (141).

In earlier novels Emecheta uses slave imagery and in the British setting second-class citizenship is used as a metaphor for marginalization. In *Kehinde* Emecheta creates a new metaphor out of the hem of a garment for the same purpose. The image first clearly appears during Kehinde's reverie in the car on the way to the abortion clinic. She recalls the shock as a child of learning that she had been a twin and falling ill at the same time. She remembers her ambivalent mothering by her aunt:

I always sensed she did not allow the milk of her love to flow unchecked as many mothers around me did. Most mothers gave too much love and tried to own the beloved. But I was haunted by my past love so Aunt Nnebogo put me on the hem of the skirt of her love. (21)

Similar images of marginalization occur later in the novel and as in the original image of maternal rejection, they relate to other women in Kehinde's life. When Moriammo rejects

Kehinde and does not attend her birthday party, “Kehinde felt again that she was sitting at the hem of life, looking in and not belonging ...” (110).

Marginalization, internal division, and unity are important themes in *Kehinde*. In the novel Emecheta interrogates the situation of choosing to live away from one’s homeland. For example, when Kehinde returns from Nigeria she feels she is back home, but her consciousness protests and says, “This is not my home. Nigeria is my home” (108). Taiwo’s voice, silent while Kehinde is in Nigeria, then speaks: “We make our own choices as we go along.... This is yours. There’s nothing to be ashamed of in that” (108). Emecheta, in one of her unique inversions, uses an ancient Nigerian tradition of Taiwo/chi to cope with leaving her home culture.

## **Conclusion**

Kirsten Holst Petersen and more recently Florence Stratton have pointed out that the major problem of a feminist approach to African literature lies in where you place the emancipation of women vis-à-vis the fight against western imperialism which oppresses men and women. In the past it has been seen as a form of betrayal to create a negative picture of Africa by maligning its treatment of women. The fight against colonialism and oppression was considered more important. Buchi Emecheta has refused to be silent and has taken the risk of writing about women’s oppression in both Nigerian and British settings. Petersen suggests that Emecheta solves the problem of nationalist betrayal in two ways: first by “referring to autobiographical data which establishes her as a clear sufferer at the hands of traditional forces,” and second by “reversing the hierarchy of importance of her subject matter” (43).

Emecheta herself emphasizes her rejection of the feminist label:

Putting myself in the role of the feminist, Western style, would, I think, clip my wings. I'd be wondering, "Will feminists like this?" or "Is this in the feminist mode?" But at the moment I can only deal adequately with any subject through the eyes of women. That's where my affinity lies. ("Bold Type" 68)

In an interview with Kenyon, Emecheta responds to the question, "What do you think of feminism today?" with the following:

White feminists do not really understand the situation in Africa. There is little class distinction in the villages; when it is difficult to get water, all women have to help each other. I can't preach feminism to such women.... It's even worse for the educated woman who has to earn, pay for schools for her children. I still feel very African, and I don't think feminists have the right to tell me what to do. (51)

In the novels discussed above, Emecheta is consistent in valorizing the emancipation of women. Her style, however, discourages viewing her characters as "homogenized" Third World Women.<sup>14</sup> In her 1994 novel *Kehinde* she confronts her expatriation and explores ways of being at home as a Nigerian woman away from home, while still exposing the racism in Britain and neo-colonialism in Nigeria. Emecheta is included in the group of writers described by Bruce King as "New Internationalists," writers who "differ from Commonwealth, Third World or ethnic writers in that [they] write about their native lands or the immigrant experience from within the mainstream of British literature" (193). Emecheta herself may not see her place as being "inside the mainstream," according to her comments to Kenyon: "Being an immigrant writer means your work will always be undervalued, that's a fact I have to live with" (48). Nevertheless, she is gradually making a place for herself internationally, particularly in her struggle against racism and oppression wherever it exists.

A.M. Porter rightfully calls *Second-Class Citizen* "the point of departure for understanding Buchi Emecheta's major fiction" (123). The themes which emerge from her

examined life appear in her fiction again and again. The choice of one's life as a taking-off point for developing authors seems particularly important for women.

Chukwuma finds in her 1989 study of Emecheta's novels that Emecheta has set a precedent in telling the truth, and that "[w]riters have not been so bold as to dip their hands in their autobiography and spread out all the hidden linen to public view" (11). Emecheta mines her own experiences with a selectivity which is complimentary to her chosen genre. In retrospect she reveals to Kenyon that she "didn't know how to create a different fiction at the time" (52). Critics such as Ebeogu accuse Emecheta of lacking the aesthetic distance which separates fiction from fact; he is confident that "the autobiographical creative exercise is not the same as the fictional and the latter demands a high degree of detachment" (Ebeogu 90). Emecheta does not deny the autobiographical nature of her writing; however, in response to a query about her main aim in writing, replies that she "just wanted to writes stories.... If you tell a good story and add a few ideas to make people think, I consider you've done quite a lot ... every good novel should depict the ideas of the author, and the society in which the author lives" (Kenyon 45).

In her discussion of "Twentieth-Century Autobiographical Fiction by Women Writers" Janet Morgan reminds us of the recent changes in attitudes towards literature. Morgan plots the destabilization of the unified text and the deconstruction of the fixed and identifiable author that accompany suspicions about the transparency of language. She declares that when such critics as Barthes and Foucault are "chronicling the death, disappearance or absence of the author ... feminist critics have been busy introducing the body of women's writing as an unmistakable presence" (7). The patriarchy might welcome or even privilege the objectivity Ebeogu aspires to and wish to deconstruct the author. Morgan, however, points out that those writing from the

margins find such anonymity “dubious at best” (12). Autobiography and autobiographical fiction are often seen as limiting for the non-western writer and as potentially holding the risk of recolonization<sup>15</sup> for the formerly colonized. Lynette Hunter reminds us that it is common for “women writers new to publishing [to] often write autobiographical or first person narratives,” and suggests that “[i]n order to remove from a position of marginality, the individual needs to communicate personal experience as significant social event” (143). In “Telling the Truth,” Sharon Butala describes her gradual realization that as a writer she did not have to “invent [her] stories the way that children make up fantastic tales (or become chronic liars)” (50). Butala found she could write the stories of her own life but such writing left her open to suspicions—“by writing autobiography, I am doing something that is inferior, not quite fair, not quite art, not what a fiction writer is supposed to do. I am in fact ‘confessing,’ which is apparently inferior to actual inventing” (50). Butala disagrees with that criticism, noting that as women think about the world differently, so too they would tell stories “differently than in conventional ways” (51); she ends with a plea for women to write true stories, “rich with the thick, dark blood of humanity, pulsing with the contradictions and beauty of real life” (52).

Emecheta appears to have avoided the potential pitfalls which can result from using autobiographical sources, and is fulfilling Hunter’s predictions and attaining empowerment and validation from her work, as well as answering Butala’s call for a different kind of writing. Stratton points to the importance of the role of African women’s writing in redefining the African literary tradition: “Uncovering gaps and silences, exposing biases and prejudices ...” (176). Buchi Emecheta has been in the vanguard of these changes.

## Chapter Three

### The Associational Literature of Ruby Slipperjack: Retention, Reclamation and Repossession

#### Introduction

It's been seven lifetimes since Europeans first arrived on the shores of North America. Our ancestors, of course, had already lived here for many thousands of years ... That initial meeting touched off a shock wave ... still felt to this day ... But we of this generation are fixing that. Ever so little by little, we are picking up the Trickster, that ancient clown, up from under that legendary beer table ... and will soon have her standing firmly on his own two feet so she can make us laugh and dance again. It's an exciting time to be alive, seven lifetimes after that first meeting. I look forward to every minute of it.

Tomson Highway, *The Dispossessed* vii-ix

First Nations musician and dramatist, Tomson Highway, confidently invokes that very ancient, universal, Amerindian hero and anti-hero, Trickster, in situating contemporary Indigenous peoples. He can do this because he is, as he says, "one of the lucky ones" (viii). He was born and raised in a strong, traditional, Aboriginal family and learned Cree as his mother tongue (viii). As Highway says, it is an important and exciting time to be alive. Reading the works of Ruby Slipperjack enables one to participate in this renaissance of Indigenous culture. Along with other Native people like Highway, Slipperjack is working to retain, reclaim and ultimately repossess the wholeness of Indigenous culture. To do this she has to resist the dominant discourse while living within the dominant culture. Such an accomplishment is possible for Slipperjack as she too is one of the "lucky ones." She is grounded in a strong, traditional culture which is tied closely to a specific place.

Georges Sioui, a Huron historian from Quebec, suggests why the Trickster might have ended up under the table for so long and why Highway is so confident in her reclamation. In his

book, *For an Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic*, Sioui attributes the erasure of First Nations history to two dominant beliefs. The first is the conviction that European culture and morality are superior, based, according to Sioui, on the theory of social evolution. The second is the perception that Indigenous people in the Americas are disappearing. This too would follow from the evolutionary theory of survival of the fittest. Standing (and persisting) in contrast to these ideas is the concept of what Sioui calls “the sacred circle of life” (xxi). The sacred circle posits “the universal interdependence of all beings, physical and spiritual” (xxi). Sioui attributes a common philosophy to all Amerindians: a philosophy reflected linguistically, despite different language families; politically, despite different political systems; and artistically, within vastly different artistic forms and genres. He believes that “[f]or the Amerindian, life is circular and the circle generates the energy of beings” (12). Sioui further argues that “the vast majority of the nomadic peoples of America are matricentric in their ideological and spiritual conception of the world” (14). Reason and the curbing of emotional excesses are key Amerindian ethical principles, according to Sioui. On the basis of this, Sioui and others calculate that the erosion of matrilineality is directly related to acculturation (15).

In his foreword to Sioui’s book, Bruce Trigger suggests what is seen by many First Nations people as a solution to acculturation and to the problems of Euroamericans. The solution is of particular importance to reading the literature of Ruby Slipperjack in that it consists of “studying the persistence of essential Amerindian values” (Sioui ix). Despite cultural transformation, Trigger maintains that “the vision has remained the same” (Sioui x).

Ruby Slipperjack is a painter, a writer and has published three literary works: two novels and one long poem. Despite this relatively small body of published literary work, extracts from

Slipperjack's novel *Honour the Sun* have been widely anthologized.<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Hartmut Lutz, Thomas King, Amerindian critic and author, credits Slipperjack as "a wonderful novelist. Really wonderful, first rate.... I think people really don't realize how good she is and I suspect Slipperjack doesn't know how good she is either" (qtd. in Lutz, *Contemporary* 110). In 1993 at the fourteenth annual International Festival of Authors, Slipperjack shared the stage with Margaret Atwood and Susan Swan at a reading. She is joining a growing number of Indigenous writers in Canada who are creating and re-creating contemporary stories inclusive of past traditions primarily for and about First Nations.

### **Life and Influences**

"I remember the trapper's shack where we were all born and raised." This is Ruby Slipperjack's response to Hartmut Lutz's query: "How did you get started writing?" (*Contemporary* 203). Slipperjack was born into the Fort Hope Indian Band on White Water Lake, north of Armstrong, Ontario, and spent her early years on her father's traplines. She is an Ojibwa (Anishinabae)<sup>2</sup> and as a child was taught Ojibwa legends and stories as well as hunting lore. When she reached school age her family moved to Collins, a community along the CN rail line, where she attended elementary school. Her residential school experience took place in Sault Ste Marie, some distance south of her home, at Shingwauk Residential School. Slipperjack completed high school in Thunder Bay where she also attended Lakehead University and graduated in 1989 from the latter with degrees in education and arts, and later, a Masters in education. A married mother of three daughters, Slipperjack holds a position at Lakehead University as Coordinator of the Native Teacher Education program in the Faculty of Education.

Ruby Slipperjack vividly remembers her early reading years and her first impetus to write. She describes to Lutz the positive parts of her inappropriate *Dick and Jane* readers: “I really got off on the pictures! The cute little animals had little jackets and such” (*Contemporary* 204). Once, en route home from day school, Slipperjack stopped off half way at the minister’s outhouse. Expecting rags for toilet paper she found instead a paperback novel. Reading it she discovered “Hey there is a story here” only to find that there was no conclusion as the back pages had been ripped off (Lutz, *Contemporary* 204). This lack of closure frustrated her and motivated her first writing efforts.

Stealing a pencil from school (forbidden), Slipperjack recalls peeling off the inner layers of a sugar bag at home to construct an ending to the story she had found in the outhouse. Often she felt the need to tell stories; she “used to drive [her] mother crazy” because her mother never knew if Slipperjack was “telling the truth or making up a story” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 204).

After she left home this habit of telling and writing down stories became, Slipperjack says, “just my form of entertainment” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 204). The process of writing itself appears to satisfy Slipperjack as she informs Lutz unregretfully, “all of what I wrote went in the fire” (*Contemporary* 204). This may explain the small body of work which Slipperjack has published and why this is not likely to increase substantially as she fears repeating discarded stories or focusing too intently on writing. “I think it would change, too,” she maintains, “if I sat down and wrote for the sake of writing, or writing so it would be published and be read, because that personal thing would be gone” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 209).

In discussions with Lutz, Slipperjack does not mention any particular literary influences. However, Beatrice Culleton, author of *In Search of April Raintree*, was helpful in getting *Honour*

*the Sun* published.<sup>3</sup> Slipperjack's work attests to the influence of ancient legends and Indigenous spirituality. Polemical or didactic commentary on contemporary injustices defer in her writing to rich associations with traditional Anishinaube spiritual life and the land. These associations are woven into the narrative in subtle ways and are at times inaccessible to outsiders. Allison Donnell notes that postcolonial critics have a propensity for favouring works with anti-imperialist agendas and this leads ironically to the "neglect of some of its most fascinating early archives and voices, which ostensibly failed to fulfil anti-imperialist agendas" (102). The focus on the devastation of colonialism may result too in neglect of contemporary writers such as Slipperjack who turn their attention on the retention or reclamation of the past.

Avoidance of sensitive, traditional and cultural areas in the critique of postcolonial literatures may lead to the denial of the need for social change. Ruby Slipperjack's writing may be more vulnerable to this neglect because of the layers of tradition in her stories and her resistance to dominant form, development and content in the novel. Often stories which do not fit mainstream ideas are not addressed because as Barbara Godard explains, they subvert "our Euroamerican definition of the text as commodity" ("Voicing" 104).

One can only surmise the traditional influences on Slipperjack's writing. Spirituality, sophisticated written texts, and complex cultural practices from ancient Americas are described by Gordon Brotherston in his *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas Through Their Literature*. Pre-contact literary history has been largely ignored by contemporary literary critics when reading and interpreting the texts of the contemporary Native renaissance. This is curious because mainstream critics often attribute ancient influences to contemporary Eurocanadian writers they are studying. One fascinating discussion of writing in *Book of the*

*Fourth World* tells of the custom of “painter-scribes” (50). At one period of time due to the visual complexity and importance of script, writers were also required to be painters.

Coincidentally, Slipperjack’s writing is very visual without being excessively descriptive and her own paintings form the covers of both of her novels.

As already noted, Slipperjack has been creating stories since her youth and discarded many of them in the fire. In an interview with Scott Smith she noted that “[s]ometimes I would even go as far as painting the cover, and binding it together, and then into the fire it would go” (7). This early visual expression would seem to imply how integral painting is to Slipperjack’s stories. However, in response to my query as to whether she painted the scenes for the express purpose of using them on the covers of her novels, Slipperjack answered, “No. I have many paintings. I sent slides to publishers with my suggestion of first choice.”<sup>4</sup>

In both of her novels, Slipperjack’s representation of spirituality is complex and might benefit from a comparison with information from ancient texts. The problem is that due to the neglect and suppression of this ancient literature, reference to what remains of it today tends to be largely autobiographical in tone and linear (scientific), arguably detrimental to the literary spirit of inquiry. The contemporary literary critic can only hope that since a limited number of these texts still exist, someday they may re-emerge the way Anglo women writers of the Renaissance and pre-Renaissance period have in recent years. For now Indigenous writers may have to do what Carlos Fuentes suggests: “imagine the past in order to remember the future” (73). The depth of Slipperjack’s representation of spirituality in her novels indicates that she is capable of doing this.

Slipperjack does not like anything to stand in the way of her stories. Techniques which

draw attention to the story process itself, the reflexivity common to postmodern styles of writing, are not favoured by Slipperjack (Lutz, *Contemporary* 209). She does favour character development, but as she says “don’t look for plot” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 215).

Aboriginal stories are a key to survival for First Nations. In “Urgent Story-Telling,” a 1995 review of two collections of traditional Aboriginal stories, Beth Cuthand declares: “If the stories live on, so will our aboriginal understanding of the world” (6). She believes this because the stories contain “history, ethics, world-view, relationships, language, origins” (6). Due to this generic importance of story, the Anishinaube consider story central to education and development for all ages. In 1975 Emma LaRoque admonished Canadian educators to teach young Native people the legends which persist from the past: “remnants of the past thread their way into the present” (*Defeathering* 14). Regarding spirituality, LaRoque found that “the vestiges of the past still exist in varying degrees in most Native communities, and from them we can imaginatively retrace the origins of our values” (*Defeathering* 29). Since LaRoque wrote *Defeathering the Indian* the erosion of Native culture has progressed rapidly. Slipperjack threads ancient traditions through contemporary (1960s) settings in *Honour the Sun* and *Silent Words*. Wilfred Pelletier, an Ontario Anishinaube, writes of the importance of story in his childhood as a means of education, discipline and spiritual guidance. In his “Childhood in an Indian Village” written in 1969, Pelletier emphasizes the equality and absence of competition in the village: “[a]t no time, in all the years I spent there, [in the village], do I ever remember anyone teaching us anything” (44). Education was accomplished by “observing and feeling” as well as total experience allowing children to make mistakes and make their own decisions (46). According to Pelletier, “The closest they [Ojibway parents] ever g[o]t to formal teaching was to tell stories”

(49). He comments as well on the type of learning received from speaking Anishinaube: “How beautiful that picture language is where they only tell you the beginning and the end and you fill in everything, and they allow you to feel how you want to feel” (48). He, of course, despairs of the changes resulting from the imposition of English at school. The education which Pelletier remembers receiving from stories is part of the reason that Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in “The Magic of Others” cautions that “stories are not just for entertainment” and emphasizes the responsibility of both the tellers and listeners (176). Keeshig-Tobias recognizes the political import of storytelling. Frantz Fanon details the essential role of storytellers in *The Wretched of the Earth* where he notes that at the beginning of colonization “the native intellectual produce[s] his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor,” but then as time progresses the writer “takes on the habit of addressing his own people” (240). Such literature, Fanon points out, “molds national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons ... it assumes responsibility” (240). Fanon goes on to explain that colonials recognized this important role of storytellers and therefore proceeded to “arrest these storytellers systematically” (241). In his interview with Lutz, Basil Johnston suggests that there is a conspiracy to totally erase Native languages, the true repositories of ancient legends and stories: “Maybe this country wants to be unilingual, suppress others” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 235).

As part of her writing influences, Slipperjack has the traditions of story and legend within her own family and community. In addition she was motivated by her early contact with the Eurocanadian world of narrative. In her small body of literary work Slipperjack encompasses many facets of her culture. Thomas King praises Slipperjack’s “associational literature” for its ability to remind Native readers of their “active present” and “viable future” due to their “cultural

tenacity” (“Godzilla” 14). Slipperjack’s writing serves to retain, reclaim, and repossess her cultural heritage.

## RETENTION

### Resistance and the Sacred Circle in *Honour the Sun*

Ruby Slipperjack is very definite as to why she wrote *Honour the Sun*: she wished to retain her memories of traditional life while she was away in the city in a foreign culture. As she explains to Scott Smith, “I’d write about the summer’s experiences and my family, and really cherish every minute I had with them. I would take these things back with me to the city as a way of keeping myself happy over the winter” (8).

In *Honour the Sun*, Slipperjack resists the dominant literary practice in form and content. Describing her rejection of “typical European format” to Lutz, Slipperjack says, “I am not going to try to pound a circle into a square” (*Contemporary* 214). Her chapters are based on seasons and some of the seasons return. “I stuck to my four seasons,” Slipperjack explained to Lutz, “I wanted that connection there, with the land” (*Contemporary* 214).

Although *Honour the Sun* could loosely be defined as a bildungsroman, the protagonist’s formation is not accomplished by the end of the novel (Abrams 112). Jerry Varsava in *Contingent Meanings* compares the modern and postmodern bildungsroman. In the former, the traditional bildungsroman, the protagonist’s tension between self and other is resolved by conforming to society. In postmodern novels of alienation the tension is resolved by rebellion (protagonist withdraws) or by destruction (protagonist kills herself). The development of the

narrator, Owl, throughout the novel does not conform to any European literary theory of formation as it involves a return to and celebration of important traditions.

The plot of *Honour the Sun* is not linear, with rising action, climax and denouement. In the sense that chronology is not dominant, it is consistent with Walter Ong's discussion of the characteristics of oral narrative traditions. Slipperjack makes it clear that in her work "[w]hen a character reacts one way or another to the situation there is never a 'because of this and that!'" (Lutz, *Contemporary* 211). In addition, although the work is fiction, much of it is autobiographical, based on Slipperjack's childhood life and environment (Lutz, *Contemporary* 204).

Judging by the limited reception of *Honour the Sun*, Slipperjack's non-polemical form of resistance is difficult for the dominant literary community to accept. Gloria Hilderbrandt, in her review of *Honour the Sun*, suggests, apparently without irony, that "we are eager to have the Native speak" (94). Thus although apparently Canada is ready, Slipperjack does not comply and meet expectations, so Hilderbrandt thinks that "*Honour the Sun* may disappoint supporters of the Native literary movement" (94). Her argument is that Slipperjack does not offer causation for important events such as her mother's "descent into alcoholism" and also that the early promise in the novel of "detail, drama and powerful emotion is not kept throughout the book" (94). Some Native critics see these very flaws as strengths in Slipperjack's writing. Thomas King designates *Honour the Sun* as one of the "better examples of associational literature" ("Godzilla" 14). As well as avoiding "judgements and conclusions," the plot in such literature, he says, is "along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature" ("Godzilla"14). The silences maintained, partly as an indication of loyalty

and respect to the Native community, are more obvious than the information conveyed in associational literature (“Godzilla” 16). These silences, sometimes viewed as gaps, or for critics like Hilderbrandt inadequacies, are perhaps a form of resistance serving to keep non-Native readers as “always outsiders,” King suggests (“Godzilla” 16). Specific examples of non-polemical resistance allow for Slipperjack to retain her traditions and the state of the sacred circle and to convey her experience, which as she says, is “tied with nature” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 207).

Owl, the narrator of *Honour the Sun* who is ten years old when the novel opens, economically records the next six years of her life in her small village. After she leaves and attends boarding school the novel contains only her summer memories back in her village. These years are ones of rapid physical and social change for Owl. She also grows spiritually. The pace of the story is appropriate to the particular time in Owl’s life. As Slipperjack notes, “I wrote how I was feeling.... In the beginning the character’s feelings were sort of lazy, spaced out, a very carefree childhood, so it dealt with quite a bit there.... Days fly by as you get older” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 214).

Within the pattern of the novel certain aspects of the life of Owl and her family are detailed with exactness. Areas focused on are rich with cultural specificity. The silences, exceptions to this pattern of cultural detail, occur in areas of potential conflict or collision within Owl herself, in negative behaviours within Owl’s community, or in the greater society.

As a small girl Owl interrogates and explores the margins of white society from an Indigenous, grounded position in her particular culture and family. As she comes more and more in contact with Canadian mainstream society her own childhood world slips away, yet at her core

tradition is retained partly perhaps because Owl tells her own story and this represents resistance to invasion by her surrounding dominant culture.

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The cover painting<sup>5</sup> of *Honour the Sun* shows, in the immediate right foreground, tall, blue pines. To the left, at a distance is a wooded point with blue water and a matching slightly dusky sky. The landscape is devoid of people. Very vivid yellow letters spell “*Honour the Sun, Ruby Slipperjack*.” A subtitle inside states that what follows is: “(*Extracted and revised from the diary of the Owl*).” And then, on the first page of the novel: “First Entry” followed by the season, “Summer 1962: Small poplar trees surround us, their leaves swish” (9).

From the cover to the first idyllic scene with Owl and her friend Sarah playing dolls under the trees singing lullabies and laughing, an Edenic, harmonious tone is established in *Honour the Sun*. But by the end of the first page the tone is shattered and contrary forces dominate and change the setting. Sarah’s brother Bobby arrives and coerces Owl to overdose on snuff, which makes her violently ill and forces her home to recover in the security of her cabin and family. This is an engrossing start to the novel and introduces two opposing forces within the first page. Slipperjack’s economy of language is impressive; she uses soft verbs to establish the harmonic play scene, and hard-edged adjectives and verbs to rapidly create the opposite feeling. For example, the poplar trees “swish and flutter,” the girls “hum,” the waves “lap.” Then when Bobby arrives he interrogates the girls at a staccato pace. He has “dark, beady eyes” and he “digs” into his pants pocket and “pops” the lid off the snuff and “shoves” it under Owl’s nose

(9). Slipperjack is able, in a few paragraphs, to introduce Owl's extended family while Owl is recovering from her ordeal. The reader experiences the pattern introduced at the beginning of the novel many times again throughout *Honour the Sun*. A human community embedded in and interacting with the natural world around it is described with detail and lulls the reader with its harmony; but then danger, racism, conflict, violence and sexism enter. By the end of the first chapter the reader is aware of both the material poverty and the wealth of tradition, affection and relationships in Owl's world. In the first scene Owl gets sick from snuff which one of her brothers has taken from his mother and sold to Bobby. Once Owl's mother becomes aware of the sequence of events her reaction is laughter and we can see that Owl feels badly enough that she will not overdose on snuff again. The lesson has been learned and no guilt is imposed by her mother. Instead Owl receives "aspirins, tea and a bowl of stew" from her mother to help her recover from the toxic dose of snuff (11). Thus food, associated with nurturance, is introduced early in the first chapter of *Honour the Sun*.

Food is important in this novel. The way it looks, is prepared, how it tastes is ceremoniously described. Owl in her rapid growing years seems to take great joy in eating. Slipperjack describes the appearance of food with an artist's sensibility and the smells and tastes with a gourmand's gusto. On the next morning after the snuff incident and in a series of mornings throughout the novel, Owl awakes to her mother cooking breakfast over a wood fire. Bannock, freshly baked with salt pork, and jam are the usual breakfasts and are described numerous times in Owl's journal entries. These breakfasts gain more significance when, once school starts, the students are issued vitamin biscuits and milk. Owl and her friend find this unappetizing: "Yuck. It's powdered milk mixed in warmish water and the biscuits taste like old

socks” (93). She uses the dietary supplement for dog biscuits. The reader gains insight into Owl’s character when Owl concludes why Ben, Jed and others ask for more biscuits: “I realize that it is probably their breakfast” (93). In the second chapter a meal prepared in the woods after berry picking is detailed: “fried fish with onions, mashed potatoes, canned corn and of course, hot bannock and blueberry jam washed down with camp-fire tea” (23). The descriptions are extremely detailed and appeal to the senses.

There is much repetition of the food theme throughout the novel and food references perform different operations. Sometimes, during passages such as those mentioned, Slipperjack’s purpose may be simply a relishing of memory. Food, with its smells, textures and appearance, often opens up the doors of memory. One suspects that the lingering of memory over many home-made, childhood meals is motivated by the writer’s inferior residential or boarding-house food. Most if not all aspects of food have a political subtext. Owl’s childhood diet features foods from the land. Store foods are merely accompaniments or supplements. Store staples like flour, sugar, tea and lard are utilized in traditional dishes (as in making bannock) and food is prepared fresh daily. Apart from the overall nostalgia of the food scenes an aggregate of skills and cultural education and sharing are conveyed in these passages.

Fish (pickerel, pike, trout, jackfish) appears to be the most favored and accessible food for Owl and her family. The fish nets are hand made and this is not an easy job. Owl picks up the twine and tries to work on a net her mother is making and finds that “it seems to take forever to do one row of squares” (34). Eventually she has the patience to make a small fishing net herself. Owl’s mother shares her catch with less well-off people in the community. One morning Owl describes waking early to go in the canoe and check the fish net with her mother before going to

school. On returning with their catch Owl describes “the three fish, their dark shiny backs curved inside the pan” (91).

Amusingly Owl recounts how the school switches from vitamin biscuits to “large, red oblong vitamin pills” (146). Since all of the students, including the teacher’s children, are unable to swallow these pills, cod liver oil is substituted. Owl makes the astute observation that, although they eat a lot of fresh fish every week, “we still have to take a teaspoon of rancid, rotten fish oil” (146). Supplementing the fresh fish are partridge, rabbit, moose, and occasionally beaver and muskrat. Bologna and corned beef from the store get a passing mention. Fruit, brought in occasionally on the train, is purchased with money from the sale of blueberries at the store. Owl is challenged by her brother Wess to try making edible bannock, a bread eaten daily. In the brief description, it is apparent that making bannock involves skills in cooking on a wood stove as well as making the dough and cooking it. Owl succeeds and is obviously proud when Wess has seconds. At one point when Wess is home there are eleven people in the small cabin, including several parentless children Owl’s mother has taken in. Nevertheless when food is served each receives his or her share with little fighting over it. There is a rule that food is never wasted. An inordinate amount of the family’s time is spent hunting, fishing and gathering food. Though this means hard work, mosquito bites and being splashed with cold water, Owl writes fondly of these expeditions. At the end of the day Owl’s mother manages to produce, over an open fire, a hearty meal for all, despite working hard herself. Visitors who happen by at meal times are fed. If Owl happens to be hungry and is not at home she is served with little formality wherever she happens to be in the village.

In Owl’s family, foodways teach various traditional skills as well as interpersonal and

communal values. The repetition of culturally specific ways of gathering, preparing and serving food in the novel serves to emphasize the nurturance and stability of these traditional ways. Western or non-Indigenous ways of eating are de-emphasized or used to point to impending dislocation from Indigenous values. For example, the meal Owl prepares for herself and her little brother during one of her mother's drinking bouts consists of "macaroni and tomato sauce, bannock with tea" (173). At one point Owl's mother Delia recovers from her drunkenness for a time. During this time she returns to her traditional ways of cooking and getting food. Once the three walk through the winter woods to a lake to ice fish and to check Delia's traps which she had set the previous day. Owl has been entrusted with the lunch. Her younger brother Brian yells at her when he discovers that she has only brought three sandwiches. Her mother asks her, "Is that all you brought?" (184). Then without reprimanding Owl, Delia proceeds to dress the muskrat from her trap and to cook it over the campfire. "It's quite good when it's cooked over the open fire like this," she tells them (184). She keeps the hide to stretch. Paired with this simple meal over the open fire comes some traditional wisdom for Owl. Her mother, aware of the anxiety Owl feels over her failure with lunch and her younger brother's anger, counsels her to "Always listen to the silence" (184). Owl carries this advice and applies it often in the coming years. Thus food brings together culture, education and even spirituality. It also provides humour in the novel.

Slipperjack has included a great deal of humour in *Honour the Sun* and it is a slapstick, very physical type of humour. Once, for example, Wess puts salt instead of sugar in Owl's coffee (43). Another time a jackfish's tail slaps young Tony's face when he bends down to smell it and Owl's mother cannot contain her "peals of high-pitched laughter" (58). Wess is always trying to

trick Owl by putting string across the path to the outhouse or other such potentially painful pranks. If someone steps in dog dirt or the puppy pees in someone's shoe it is occasion for hilarity. The mere appearance of one person always elicits humorous laughter. This person is the Town Joker.

Oddly this person is never named but is always referred to as the Town Joker. He appears at least nine times in the novel and is seen through Owl's eyes always as a positive figure, with one exception. He is briefly described on his first visit to Owl's cabin as having "loose jointed legs" and being slightly deaf (38). He often appears after the family has experienced some trauma; he lightens the mood. On the Joker's first visit noted in the novel, David, the eldest boy, has just come home to find that his beloved dog has been shot by a drunk while the family cowered inside the cabin. When the Joker arrives he tries to tickle Barb, Owl's eldest sister, and she throws him into a piece of cardboard whereupon he slips into some fish entrails. His further attempts to grab Barb while he is covered in fish results in roars of laughter. He finally has to go wash at the lake but by the time the Joker leaves showering everyone with water from his wet jacket, David "laughs so hard he has to wipe his eyes" (38). On other visits the Joker cuts wood, repairs a door that has been damaged by violent intruders, tells stories, or starts a game of ball with all ages. He enjoys teasing and chasing women but seems, through Owl's eyes at least, hilariously incongruous in a romantic role.

The Town Joker in *Honour the Sun* seems very close to the Trickster character in Ojibwa mythology. He is unnamed but referred to in uppercase letters, appears at times of need, seems amusingly eccentric, is vulnerable to making mistakes, and plays a healing and unifying role in the community. Nanabush, the Trickster character, is a paradox, both hero and anti-hero, but he

appears here and assists the weak as he is said to do in the lore (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 160). His presence seems a statement of spirituality expressed without words. The Town Joker often appears in the novel in close proximity to the description of the silent ritual from which the novel gets its name.

While Owl is young, living at home with many of her siblings, her mother is the victim of several violent episodes and calls upon traditional Native spirituality to recover. For example, in a scene when a drunk breaks down the door and enters the cabin at night, the children flee to a relative's cabin until the man leaves after having raped Owl's mother. This scene is described economically giving only enough information for the reader to know what happened and how Owl feels about it: "my teeth are still chattering so hard my jaw is getting tired. Then I realize I'm not cold; I'm just so tense" (100). The next morning, however, when Owl awakes early she is still angry and frightened from the violence that occurred the night before. She sees her mother down with an auger getting water out of the frozen lake. Having temporarily replaced the door, Delia heats the water and has all of the children wash and put on clean clothes, comb their hair, and face the rising sun. "When the sun comes over the horizon, he will see you and be very pleased that you're all ready to greet him and he will bless you," she tells them (101). Shortly after breakfast is over the Joker arrives, bringing more slapstick comedy over the collapsed door as he assists with repairs. Delia recovers from the devastating experience and heals her family with the help of traditional spirituality and the traditional community. It is typical of Slipperjack's culturally affirming writing style to frankly present the problems of alcohol and violence strategically juxtaposed with the traditional spiritual strengths of the same community. Basil Johnston notes that to "the Anishnabeg, each new rising of the sun was tantamount to a

new life, a time new and different from that which passed the previous day” (*Ojibway Ceremonies* 136).

At the beginning of the novel, appropriate to her age, Owl demonstrates little contemplation or self-reflection; she simply experiences and feels. She does interact with her environment and observes it with her own wise, unique spirit and with the intensity typical of a healthy child. In the one non-humorous scene with the Joker, when Owl comes home unexpectedly to find her dog’s puppies hanged to death, she initially rages against the Joker calling him a “mean, evil man” (108). Gradually, however, she reasons from her experience that this is the kindest way to kill the puppies as she knows that there is not enough food to feed them. Thomas King points out that “[o]ne of the roles of the trickster is to try to set the world right ... He’s a creator and a destroyer” (Rooke 68).

Other allusions to the trickster tradition, apart from the Town Joker, appear to be present in *Honour the Sun*. The narrator’s name, Owl, is associated with the Trickster. In one of the legends about Trickster’s adventures Owl played a significant role in healing him and restoring his sight. John McLeod narrates this legend, called “The Shivering Tree,” in *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. In this legend Trickster/Nanabush is tricked by The Juggler (a sorcerer), loses his eyes, and is alone, blind and vulnerable in the woods. Owl, Nanabush’s traditional enemy, appears but refuses to lose his dignity by fighting a blind opponent. He instead offers to make “peace for [his] children” by giving Nanabush a pair of his eyes. Owl gave his day vision to Nanabush and that is why he only sees at night. Nanabush is so thankful that he declares: “From this day, Owl, the night is yours ... all who hear your call at night shall show their respect” (229). Owl is designated an official Emissary and before they part

Nanabush makes a pledge: “Your call will be my message in the night that I, Nanabush, never sleep but with my ears open, that even at night I watch those whom I protect, and that I keep a watch out for those who would do harm to The Creation” (230). Thus *Honour the Sun* contains some powerful and ancient allusions and Owl’s name gives her a legacy connected to them.

As Owl matures, she has moments of personal and metaphysical insight. These are not underlined or emphasized for the reader and are always in context: little narrative nuggets, whole stories within the main novel. One of Owl’s epiphanies comes when she is thirteen and she decides to skip school to collect much needed firewood. As she walks home pulling the logs on the sleigh, Owl stops in the middle of the frozen lake, smokes, and senses her smallness there. She contemplates God and thinks how much more reliable Jesus is than her mother, especially when she is drinking. Owl has just been confirmed by the Bishop. At the end of her self-conscious pondering Owl decides that she should leave her mother free to “do as she pleases ... I can look after myself, can’t I?” (175). This rather profound decision at such a young age proves to be helpful to Owl later when she is pursued by various suitors and must respond to their pressure and her own physical desire. This recognition leaves her free, and enables her to take care of her own future.

Intertextual references are juxtaposed effectively for a Native audience reading *Honour the Sun*. The Christian, written texts are placed beside the oral, Native stories. Every night Delia reads to her children after they are in bed. Owl records in her diary that “[t]here’s a thick, red Cree Bible which no one understands but it’s read anyway. The other is a thin, black prayer book in Ojibway that she’s reading now” (15). Once the lights are out, Owl’s family start telling jokes and stories: “Sometimes we tell old Indian legends with some hilarious mistakes.... Mom tells us

another and we keep repeating it again till we can tell it correctly. I like the story time” (15). The emphasis on the traditional is apparent and the preference for it obvious. There are direct references to Anishinaube legends throughout the novel. One of the legends Owl’s mother teaches her is about the girl who stared at the moon too long when it was forbidden and the moon came and took her away where she stays forever with her water pail (122). This legend seems to be well known as Norval Morrisseau, an artist, repeats a variation of it near the beginning of his “Ojibway Beliefs About Nature, Weather and Other Different Matters”:

The Ojibwa believe the earth to be their mother and that we are children of the earth. The sun is the sister of the world, the moon is the brother. The figure on the moon is believed to be that of a small boy carrying two water pails. At one point a small Ojibwa boy was told not to look at the moon too long for it was forbidden and the moon would take him away, but the lad ... wanted to prove if this were true and kept on staring. Finally the moon came closer and closer and took away the Ojibwa lad and this is where he has lived from that day. (16)

In *Honour the Sun*, however, Slipperjack does not shy away from exposing the tensions resulting from the clash of Western and Native world views. Often Slipperjack juxtaposes two world views; no commentary is needed for her Native audience to understand what is occurring since they experience such tensions as part of their daily lives.

As Owl gets older, many of her siblings leave and as a result Delia has more trouble centralizing her life around traditional spirituality and ways of life. The erosion of this part of the family’s life is suggested in the novel by placing Christianity in the forefront. Nevertheless, Slipperjack always manages to slip Indigenous tradition into the narrative. When Owl reaches puberty her mother acts angrily towards her, shrieks at her, and calls her unclean: “Your body is already ready to receive a baby!” (188). The underlying message is conveyed in a few words. Delia cannot provide the appropriate rituals for her daughter at this time. There is no communal

support for this or perhaps the tradition has been lost. Delia angrily tells Owl: “I did not have mine till I was almost sixteen and I had to go and sit in a little wigwam so I didn’t contaminate anything in the house ... now, look at you” (188). Traditional commemoration rituals for puberty as described in *Ojibway Heritage* bear great similarities to those described in Buchi Emecheta’s novel *The Bride Price*:

When the vigil for womanhood was over the girl was returned to her home and village by her mother where a feast awaited her. At the feast an elder welcomed her saying “you left as a girl; you return as a woman. We sorrowed when you departed, leaving behind a girlhood we had grown to love. We rejoice at your return, new and different. Through you will the people live and live on.” The elder lady then embraced the young woman; in like fashion the other women welcomed the young woman into womanhood. (142)

Owl feels angry towards her own body (“I don’t ever want a baby ... let it never come again”) but accepts her sister’s explanation that “Mom’s mad because you were the last of her baby girls” (189). This sounds like an acculturated, even if consoling, explanation because Owl’s sister probably did not have the traditional custom explained to her when she reached puberty.

Slipperjack also effectively juxtaposes Native ways of learning with the Canadian educational system. From LaRoque’s description of the educational system we know that even at its best school for Owl was Eurocentric, boring and stereotypical. On one particular day Owl notes in her diary how long the school day seemed and that she got caught daydreaming. Her daydream, as it happens, is about the previous day when she was out with her mother ice-fishing. The passage that follows shows Slipperjack’s pairing of detailed description of traditional ways, conveying closeness to the land with feelings of family relatedness.

Yesterday there was no school so I was able to go with Mom to check the rabbit snares deep into the bush on the other side of the tracks. Oh, it was so nice. The sun was shining, the air was fresh and clean, the snow was melting, and the birds

were chirping.... Then we came upon a lake and Mom chopped two holes in the ice while I broke off pine branches to sit on.... There we sat and fished, facing each other about twenty feet apart. She told me stories about Indians of long ago and the magic people who lived inside the rock cliffs.... We came home with three rabbits and four jackfish. Mom was so happy and I was really proud of us.

Pausing at my desk, teacher whispers in my ear, "Hey, wake up! You're daydreaming again!" (124-25)

Slipperjack does indict the schools in this novel. For example, though it is only briefly described and barely understood, Owl, when she is quite young, experiences sexual abuse from one of the teachers. Nevertheless, the reader is also aware of Owl's personal involvement and abilities in school and as time goes on school provides a diversion and an imperfect escape for her from the pain of her mother's increasing alcohol abuse. When Owl is about twelve she is the only one in the grade six row: "That's the row that's always empty for fear of being sent far way to school.... I feel at times like I'm sitting on death row" (169). This is a powerful example of Slipperjack's economical style; this short statement speaks worlds about the residential school system. Being sent away to residential school was a kind of death of a child's traditional ties and often spelled the total loss of Aboriginal language.

As a child Owl gravitates towards those traditions within her family which are largely transmitted by her mother. She astutely critiques other representations of reality which contradict her Indigenous knowledge and experience. For example, at the store Owl sees a painting of a huge moose being attacked by wolves, and comments that "somehow I don't believe a moose like him would be caught like that. He looks too big and healthy to me" (27). Much later, while on a camping trip, Freddy and Owl get into trouble for setting up a bearskin on a tree to simulate a moose if seen from the water. The Widow, Freddy's mother, chastises them saying that Americans are hunting in the area: "They'd think nothing of riddling our camp with a million

bullets trying to kill that thing you put out there” (169). One can read these two vignettes as a commentary on the inadequate understanding and representation of the natural world by white society.

When Owl is older the results of acculturation, schooling, and her mother’s deviation from traditional ways leave her less likely to critique mainstream society. As Owl takes in more of the complexities of her environment, she mentions her family’s traditional lifestyle less and less. When she leaves her community for the residential school, Owl carefully packs, along with her very few clothes, two “shiny rocks, a pinecone and a mallard tail feather”; her sister Barbara discards them saying, “What are they going to think, you carrying around things like these? White people are going to be looking after you” (190).

When Owl returns home for school holidays at age sixteen it is clear that many things have changed. On visiting the graveyard she demonstrates her old critical stance towards mainstream society; she notes that very few people in her community have died “natural deaths ... The railway line and alcohol-related accidents take so many lives” (209). Her childhood affection for her home returns: “I love this community. I know every hill and hollow” (209).

In a final chapter of *Honour the Sun*, Owl returns to the cabin where she was raised, now vacated and overgrown with weeds. In this scene the importance of Anishinaube spiritual beliefs is reiterated. Owl again meets the Medicine Man and he reminds her of the beliefs she has retained from her youth.

One thing you know for certain without a doubt is that the sun comes up every morning and sets again in the evening. Does it care about the clouds? The stillness itself lasts for ever but the noise can be silenced. (211)

On the last page of Owl’s journal (corresponding to the last page of the novel) Owl

attends to many of the important elements of her traditional Ojibway world: sun, water, plants and earth are transmitted, as experiences that particular day, to her memory. She will remember them even though she must leave home again. In outlining the importance of these elements Basil Johnston notes that from earliest times the Anishinabeg honored equally Father Sun and Mother Earth. The earth symbolized by rock is considered “strong and enduring” (*Heritage* 25). The important elements (sun, water, plants and earth) along with the presence of the Medicine Man in the final chapter reassure the reader that despite the forces of acculturation at residential school, Owl still retains the traditions of her people. The Medicine Man embodies the traditional past in the present. In his calm presence, Owl says, “I feel like I have just completed a circle” (210).

## RECLAMATION

### Moving the Mundane to the Spiritual in “A spirit of Wings”

The poem “A spirit of Wings” was written specifically for inclusion in a catalogue for an art show called “Flight Pattern Uninterrupted.” This is Slipperjack’s only published poem; as she informed Lutz “[t]hat was the one and only time I did that. I mean for the public” (210). Slipperjack identifies the importance of feeling as a key to all of her writing: “If the feeling is not there, then it is worthless” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 210). “A spirit of Wings” is a poem of transformation and centres on the world of birds, a very important part of the natural world for Anishinaube people.

In ancient Amerindian literature, poetry, chant and song held a prominent place along

with stories and legends. American Native Duane Niatum points out that historically Amerindians had “a path of transformation of life’s experiences into song” (71). According to Penny Petrone, Native poetry lagged behind prose in the 1970s (*Native Literature in Canada* 130). However, as W.H. New notes in his introduction to *Native Writers Canadian Writing*, “[s]ometimes people are willing to listen only to those voices that confirm the conventions they already know” (4). In his essay on American Indian poetry Niatum posits that “the truth of words is no more or no less than the truth revealed in Nature” (65). The combination of honoring the truth in Nature with a retention of ancient traditions makes Slipperjack’s poem similar to some American Native poets’ themes described by Niatum, who notes how easily “an American Indian ... can take on the voice of an animal, blue jay, or a stream and convinces us of the naturalness of the transforming act” (78). The words of poets, according to Niatum, “move the mundane world into the spiritual” (66).

Coleman, Frogner and Eich, collectors of the tales contained in *Ojibwa Myths and Legends*, make particular note of the importance of birds in both modern and traditional lore. Birds were observed in the forest and around homes for weather forecasting. “[W]e heard over and over,” the collectors said, “‘Birds meant much to the early Ojibwa’” (105). Examples of teaching tales for parents and children are recorded in this collection and often transformations of humans to birds take place in the tales. Three examples (stories of the robin, the owl and the oriole) are presented in this collection. In one a boy turns into a robin out of choice after a long fast and vision quest (38). In the story of “The Owl and the Little Girl,” an owl takes a child after a mother threatens her with abduction by the owl if she does not obey. As a lesson to the parent the child is cared for by the owl and returned when the parent is properly apologetic (40). In these

stories the moral or aesthetic qualities of the birds are emphasized.

Basil Johnston in *Ojibway Heritage* states that “All life must be honoured. The quality of life for one order depends upon another” (57). On another occasion, Johnston expresses the unique and little understood First Nations’ reverence for the land, and notes that the “land” includes other inhabitants such as birds, animals, fish, etc. as well as bodies of water, mountains and weather. As well as respect paid to the land for its nurturance, Johnston explains that “the Earth is also a teacher” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 232). In her poem Slipperjack represents this view of Nature and the land. Expressing forceful, transcendent feelings, the poem is a convincing narrative of transformation looking—as many traditional, Anishinaube stories do—to bird life for wisdom.

Small, newsprint pages announce “A spirit of Wings” and inside down the right side of each page of the gallery catalogue on which the poem is written are three small photographs of Ruby Slipperjack in a casual pose. The first line of the poem, “My spirit awakens and it stirs,” begins Slipperjack’s seventeen-stanza, unrhymed poem. The first-person narrator of “A spirit of Wings” transforms into a number of distinct species of bird life in a quest-like circumnavigation. The triple photographs of Slipperjack along the side of the pages may symbolize many voices in one. From the beginning of this poem it is obvious that Slipperjack is addressing more overtly abstract concepts than in her prose works (the second word of the poem is “spirit”), yet her colloquial diction and first-person voice are familiar. Her usual linguistic economy is appropriate for the short poem. In the first stanza Slipperjack sets the tone which provides the rationale for the following stanzas.

The first line of the poem introduces the abstract in a mood of restlessness and desire:

“My spirit awakens and it stirs.” The entire first stanza sets the rather rapid pace of the poem with active verbs piled upon one another in parallel structures emulating an oral style: “to flee, to wander, to explore/ ... I struggle, I strain, I pull.” In contrast with words denoting freedom, speed and lightness there are fewer words which are connotative of capture and heaviness. Emotive diction is more impressive due to its economical use. For example, the line “Feet enslaved to the ground” conveys the whole physical opposition to the narrator’s spiritual desire “to flee.”

The second stanza is transitional and depicts the shedding of earthly bonds. Once in flight and at one with nature, the narrator declares: “my song of joy finds no voice.” After her/his feet are no longer “enslaved to the ground,” “[t]he air rushes to capture” her/him. But by the end of the second stanza the transformed spirit has found voice: “my sound shatters the stillness.”

In the third, fourth and fifth stanzas the spirit is transformed into an owl. *Honour the Sun* was published in 1987 and “A spirit of Wings,” written in 1992, contains some intertextual references to it. For example, the narrator of *Honour the Sun* is called Owl by her family and the Medicine Man; this implies a spiritual connection. “An owl hooted several nights in a row outside our cabin before I was born. It went away when I was born but I was a night baby with big round eyes...,” Owl explains to the Medicine Man regarding her name (211). In the poem’s energetic third stanza the owl/narrator salutes the moon and triumphantly declares, “I lay claim to the night.”

In the fourth stanza the narrator heralds the rising sun and confusion ensues, but at the end of the fifth stanza the owl spirit identifies “the city where I once lived.” This fifth stanza suggests a time warp or a layering of time as owl identifies the “stones of ancient graves/ now covered by shining windows.” The perspective of the aerial view is matched by the objectivity of

the language in this stanza. From this distance the prevalence of the past in the present is made apparent.

In stanza six a transformation to a seagull takes place—a transition that is accomplished smoothly in the poem. In the next three stanzas the narrator/seagull observes one huge old seagull “laughing and hopping around” at the edge of a crowd of gulls observing a young gull suffering from having swallowed a double fish hook lure. In two brief lines the narrator describes the young gull’s unfortunate impending fate: “hunger would follow and death would claim/ the young one with its unshed grey.” The narrator/seagull flaps away from the “ringing screeches” and transforms into a duck in stanza ten. The duck’s proud, peaceful paddling soon gets cut short by “[t]he sudden roar of a flying machine.” Stanza eleven is one in which human beings and human machines are juxtaposed with a duck’s world view. Amusingly the duck notices ladies giggling hysterically at his “undignified response” to the airplane. Slipperjack applies gender issues cross-species and presents an implied male narrator filled with vanity and ego at this point in the poem. The final two lines of the stanza are possibly ironic: “I pose in grace and quiet serenity/ and know that I am the model of perfection.” Stanza twelve, however, convinces the reader that the duck has a sense of humour about himself. Under attacks by rocks (humans enter the poem again), the ducks “took to the sky” sweeping the narrator along. Soon however the duck swerves, distracted by a bag of proffered crumbs. The narrator states at the end of the stanza, “I swooped down on that bag” and another transformation signified by “my black raven wings” takes place.

Stanza thirteen may be subversively suggestive; it begins: “Glancing around I staked my claim.” But a voice overhead squawks a warning “Hey! Hey! Go Away! Go Away!” This second

reference to “claims” in the poem may allude to Native land claims. The new transformation (a raven or a blackbird) contains intertextual references to Slipperjack’s novel *Honour the Sun*.

In *Honour the Sun* after Owl’s family recover from a violent attack by a community drunk, Owl lies in her bed and happily imagines “being a blackbird. The warm air gently lifts my breast, filling me, through me, and I become one with the night, only to emerge again as Me, to honour the sun...” (39). The symbolism of the crow, close relative of the raven, is presented in *Honour the Sun* when the whole community responds excitedly to the arrival of the first crow in the spring (121). The essence of spiritual importance in these two passages from the novel is expanded upon in this poem.

At the end of stanza thirteen, the narrator decides to flee to the nearby trees for safety. In the fourth transformation, the spirit downsizes: “the leaves are twice as big as my head.” But, the narrator proclaims, “my voice is greater than all of me.” The fourteenth and fifteenth stanzas emphasize voice and the difference between physical power and the power of the voice: “my voice is greater than all of me .../ my wonderful voice rings out once more.” The simple rhyme scheme of the fifteenth stanza imparts a musicality not apparent in the other sixteen stanzas.

The function of the sixteenth stanza mirrors the second in that it is transitional. It is pervaded with an imperative tone and passive voice. The song has died “a voice no more.” In the seventeenth stanza the narrator gently drifts “down like a falling feather” to her/his human body and repeats the steps of the first transformation in reverse order. This repetition and return to the original state results in a circular pattern. Throughout the poem voice is associated with the transformed state. Only by spiritual transformation at one with the natural world can the narrator reclaim her/his powerful and wonderful voice and see “the stones of ancient graves” (the history

of the ancestors, stanza four). The concept of flight is traditionally associated with Native spirituality.

Both the ability to fly, to be released from gravity, and the association with birds is related to shamanic healing. In his book *Shamans, Healers and Medicine Men*, Holger Kalweit points out that, “A prerequisite of any seance is that the shaman must be able to ... fly through the air.... For this reason many cultures associate shamans with birds or with flight in general” (139). In “A spirit of Wings” Slipperjack demonstrates her ability to effectively use poetic language to express themes similar to those of her novels and to stress the importance of reclamation of land, history and identity.

Slipperjack’s interest in “voice” and her sensitivity to her spiritual traditions, her connectedness with the land and with traditional healing provide continuity between “A spirit of Wings” and *Honour the Sun* and her second novel *Silent Words*.

## REPOSSESSION

### Explaining the Silences: *Silent Words*

Ruby Slipperjack wrote the highly autobiographical *Honour the Sun* to cheer herself while she was at school in exile from her community and family; “A spirit of Wings” was written for inclusion in the gallery catalogue “Flight Pattern Uninterrupted”; and *Silent Words* was written during her graduate studies in education. In an interview with Lutz, Slipperjack maintains that writing is a hobby for her and “a way ... to try and understand people” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 211).

*Silent Words* is a coming-of-age novel as was *Honour the Sun*; however, Danny, the young protagonist, is not embedded in a rich traditional environment as Owl of *Honour the Sun* was. Danny suffers greatly and must work very hard to recover, to become whole and repossess his Indigenous heritage, which completely fell apart when his father moved into town to live with a white woman and his mother left. In addition to the difference in their protagonists' early years, these two novels present stark contrasts in the areas of sensibility, gender focus and structure. Owl's story is told within a feminine, maternal sensibility but Danny's is very male centered. Until she reaches puberty, Owl is properly mothered by her own mother and many "little mothers" as Emecheta calls them in *Kehinde*—sisters, aunts and girl friends. Danny, on the other hand, is deprived of his mother and searches for her. He is in need of a caring father. Only by finding strong Indigenous father figures and elders can he grow and become healed. The conclusion of the two younger protagonists' journeys differs as well, with one, Owl, leaving the community itself and with the other, Danny, creating a new Indigenous community. Despite the stark contrasts, both of Slipperjack's novels share similarities important in Native literary tradition.

*Silent Words* and *Honour the Sun* are both informed by what Paula Gunn Allen<sup>6</sup> calls "continuance" (8). The novels also partake of the intertextuality of tradition (Gunn 17). In addition, *Silent Words* focuses, like Slipperjack's other writings, on the positive Indigenous parts of her characters' lives while still realistically representing the negative or destructive aspects of their world. Silence, particularly its spiritual aspects, is introduced in *Honour the Sun*: "The 'silences' in *Honour the Sun* are explained in *Silent Words*."<sup>7</sup>

In two out of three examples, reviews of *Silent Words* are similar to the reviews of

*Honour the Sun. Quill and Quire's* Stephen Smith focuses on Danny's violent home life (especially the violence from his father). The focus of Smith's review is puzzling as violence takes up a small part of the novel and is not the whole point of Danny's exodus and quest. Virginia Beaton, somewhat like Smith in her review, also complains about the flat story line devoid of tension and day-to-day descriptions of Danny's life, characteristics which both reviewers find monotonous. Beaton concludes that there is too much detail and that "*Silent Words* suffers from too many words and not enough stories" (48). Jo Anne Williams Bennett takes less of a Eurocentric approach.<sup>8</sup> She recognizes the paucity of literature by Native Canadian women: "We are sorely in need of hearing the stories that native Canadians tell themselves and there is a regrettable lack of these in print" (42). Bennett spends a large proportion of this review explaining that Native people find it difficult to publish due to the fact that their "story-telling conventions differ radically from those of the people who run publishing firms" (42). She carefully outlines some differences between Native and European literature: "appreciation of ambiguity, the importance of continuing transformations and the lack of need for closure" (42). She points out the vastly different views of acceptable lifestyle for children among Native people shown in *Silent Words* and the "underlying premise ... quite foreign to many Euro-Canadians" that the community would automatically support without question a young run-away (43). Slipperjack's conclusion comes under scrutiny and she loses points for trying to "tie things up" like mainstream literature. This review does point out the benefits of minority fiction in "that it enables the rest of us to examine our beliefs and prejudices from someone else's perspective, to see the arbitrariness of the things we take for granted" (43). Bennett is an anthropologist and her comments bear resemblance to postcolonial theory in its emphasis on relating the literature to the

dominant discourse. One of the most exceptional aspects of Slipperjack's work so far is that it makes no apologies to mainstream culture nor does it defer to it by way of being explicitly reactionary or polemical in structure or content. Despite this, Slipperjack does employ some dominant, modern narrative strategies in her work; for example, in the closure of *Silent Words* many of the characters come together for a wedding at which the protagonist delivers a type of summing-up soliloquy.

In "Writing from a Native Woman's Perspective," Jeanette Armstrong describes her frustration in trying to write: "we find out the way people perceive what we write becomes transferred into the dominant cultural mode" (56). This results, she continues, in her "explaining many things ... talking in terms that aren't necessary" (56). Slipperjack does not appear to "talk in terms that aren't necessary" at least for her intended Indigenous audience. The non-Native reader may not experience as many gaps in *Silent Words* as in *Honour the Sun* because in Danny, Slipperjack has a narrator who is learning as the reader is, and he is somewhat alienated from his traditions. She sustains in a convincing manner the point of view of a young, confused and hurt boy who experiences violence while living within a non-rural mainstream environment. Slipperjack points out how, in writing *Silent Words*, she tries to discover the "person inside the character": "it is amazing how Danny has to figure out how to deal with life's situations. Because you let the character grow, and it becomes real" (Lutz, *Contemporary* 211). *Silent Words* continues to flesh out the many positive, life affirming, mysterious and funny dimensions of Anishinaube culture. It expands Owl's extended family in *Honour the Sun* to include what to Danny becomes a huge, embracing Aboriginal community. Just as many Indigenous traditions are still present in the culture though they are not very visible, this wider community was there

all the time in the background waiting for Danny (and also the Native reader) to bring it into focus.

In *Silent Words* Slipperjack includes familiar territory from *Honour the Sun*: the obtaining and preparing of traditional foods; the pace of life, affection and sense of community. Many more Anishinaube rituals are introduced in *Silent Words* with an emphasis on their endearing presence and practice rather than on their erasure as, for example, in the puberty ritual alluded to in *Honour the Sun*.

Indian writers, according to Armstrong, do not have the luxury of building up writing persona[e]: "... they get right to the centre of things and sometimes that's hard for non-Indian people to accept. Those realities are too difficult for them to deal with or it's not socially acceptable to speak about them ..." ("Writing" 57). Although Slipperjack creates violent scenes in *Honour the Sun*, *Silent Words* begins with Sarah, a white woman, brutally beating Danny, her step-son. This opening scene provides an opposite dynamic to the one present in *Honour the Sun* where violence was perpetrated by an older boy on a younger girl; the violence seems worse for being perpetrated by an adult on a child. This violent introduction hits the non-Native reader with a harsh reality and inverts many of the predominant stereotypes.

Though it is not apparent at the beginning of the novel, Danny's father has betrayed his Native wife, Charlotte. Sarah, a white woman of dubious character, coerced Daniel into living with her, claiming that she carried his child. It was at this time that Charlotte left her family. In a 1994 interview with Jennifer Kelly, Lee Maracle makes clear that Native "men have a vested interest in holding on to the issue of racism, because then the enemy is external ... I think that very often racism operates as sexism in our community and often sexism operates as internalized

racism ...” (“Coming” 80). One thinks of Owl’s mother in *Honour the Sun* and how vulnerable she was to the violence from the men in the community when they were drinking. Further to this Maracle notes, “I have not found a Native man whose sexism extends to white women in quite the same way that it operates in our communities ... I think these two things are separate phenomenon in our communities” (“Coming” 80). Slipperjack appears to be exploring feminist issues in a seemingly male populated novel but she understands sexism within her specific cultural context and within the wider racist society in which both Native men and women live. The violence in the introduction to *Silent Words* goes right to the centre of racism and the type of sexism that Maracle says Native women experience all the time within Canadian culture. Slipperjack is meeting what Maracle coins the “standard” for really good Native writing; that is “[w]hen they’re really putting out what they honestly feel, and their essential thread of lineage is woven in there” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 176).

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On the cover<sup>9</sup> *Silent Words* is printed in black thin letters and below framed like a snapshot in an album, a painting, in the style of photo-realism, depicting an empty, white sand beach. The beach curves beckoningly to a distant birch bush and in the median foreground a large poplar tree tilts, reaching for the slightly rippled, almost surreal-looking, water. Below this inviting picture: “A Novel by Ruby Slipperjack.” Chapter One begins: “I wiped the sweat from my face as I walked along the bush path to the corner store and emerged beside the parking lot ... I kicked an empty can away from the sidewalk as I approached a stop sign” (1).

In *Silent Words* there is no gradual easing into a community or a context as there is in *Honour the Sun* with its balancing of harmony and disarray. Instead within the first few sentences the reader is hit with markers of the dominant, white, English-speaking, consumer society: a store, a parking lot, garage and a sign demanding “stop” in English. In a further example of economy of language, Slipperjack makes an intertextual/cultural reference in the second paragraph to sum up how the boy, alert to potential beatings from a gang of white teenaged boys, feels about this environment. When he is half way down the deserted looking street that leads to the store he thinks: “It looked like a scene from a scary movie where a huge monster from the swamp ate up all the townspeople” (1). During the ensuing anticipated attack from the feared boys, his comparison with a horror movie is apt. The final act of the “blond one” is to throw sand in his eyes and spit on him! As the boy wipes “spit and shame” off his face with his sleeve, he thinks: “I could never tell Dad about them. Never!” (2).

Danny enters the bush path to go home and as he rests under a tree he takes solace in watching a little brown bird as it hops. His memory of a scene a year before with his mother is triggered by this little bird. The intimate connection he makes between people and animals or birds is a hint of Danny’s world view. The boy seems dissociated from his own bodily needs because he is surprised to discover his own stomach making hunger noises so he must attempt to go home for food.

With only this brief interval of respite between them, there follows another violent scene in a vividly described, filthy house, with a neglected baby and various unsavoury details. Red-headed Sarah attacks Danny as he tries to grab some toast to stave off his hunger, and he comes across her in bed with one of his father’s friends. Slipperjack’s skills of sensory description add

intensity to the violence and sordidness in this scene. Sarah's maliciousness is emphasized by the unnamed man's interception of her brutal attack and his statement: "Sarah, let go! He's just a little kid!" (4). Another brutal attack by Sarah follows after Danny discovers her stealing his father's money. This time it is apparent that she may have inflicted a brain concussion on Danny. To get rid of him, Sarah lies and tells Danny that his mother is at Colby's Landing. At this point, the boy overcomes the side effects of the beating enough to run away from the house (6). The presentation of Sarah in these short few pages is as bad as any in literature—she does not have a single redeeming feature. The view of Sarah's character presented in the introduction is consistent with the world view of a boy Danny's age. Danny flees and meets up with his best friend Tom a little distance from the house.

In the remainder of this short chapter Slipperjack conveys many of the issues which cause tension between Native people and the dominant white society. When Tom wants to take Danny home to get his wounds tended by his mother, Danny, with the sad awareness of someone much older than his years, refuses Tom's help as he knows the authorities would separate him from his father once the abuse is revealed. Tom washes Danny's wounds and the ensuing interaction between the boys provides a microcosm of the relationship between dominant Canadian society and First Nations. Tom describes his upcoming holiday at his grandfather's camp; this idyllic description irritates Danny and he directs his friend to "Shut up" (8). Tom, no doubt concerned about Danny's injuries and disadvantages, suggests that he go to his own relatives. This brings out Danny's frustrations and worry even more as he remembers visiting his Uncle Fred and watching him eat steak in front of him while "I was so hungry all the time there" (8). Because he does not explain this to Tom, his friend suggests he find his mother. Danny yells at Tom again, to

which Tom replies, “I don’t need no stupid Injun telling me to shut up!” (9). The boys come close to a fight but Danny’s injuries are too debilitating. The only thing they can do is sit in silence because whenever they try to explain they begin arguing again. As they wait for a prank they have mutually planned to stop cars, Danny, suffering physically and psychologically, fantasizes choking Sarah (“Witch”) and “those boys” who formerly beat him up on the street. Danny, who has been badly abused and who does not have a supportive parent, acts extremely stoical with Tom. Tom sees his friend’s suffering but his racism surfaces rapidly when he feels guilty and cannot easily solve Danny’s problems. Neither of the boys expresses his true feelings. Danny, who is pushed beyond what is humanly tolerable, can find refuge only in violent fantasy. Tom is completely ignorant about Danny’s Indigenous heritage, what it means for his mother to be lost to him, as well as the extent of his anger. Though Danny is forced to conform to the dominant norms of Tom’s society, his parents and society have not taught Tom anything but racism towards Indigenous people. The relationship of these two boys seems to reflect that of mainstream Canada and Native peoples.

Although *Silent Words* is written in the first person, its tone is not as personal as Owl’s voice in *Honour the Sun*. Thus one might more easily view Danny in more symbolic terms than Owl. Theresia Quigley suggests in *The Child Hero in the Canadian Novel* that at certain periods of history an “author’s portrayal of childhood has been largely interpreted as primarily symbolic” (129). The “vulnerability of the child as the powerless member of the larger family unit is said to signify the oppression of an entire people by centuries of outdated ... restraints” (Quigley 129). If that is the case then Danny stands as a poignant symbol in the first two chapters of *Silent Words* as he runs away on the train, after being assisted in buying a ticket by his friend Tom, and begins

a heroic quest to find his mother.

For the first part of the quest, Danny uses trains as a means of travel. His train journeys prove frustrating in the search for his mother but throughout the novel trains weave in and out of the lives of the Ojibway people. In Slipperjack's story trains serve as both a means of retreat from the oppression of mainstream society and as the cause of oppression. For example, on the second day of Danny's journey away from home he is pursued by teenagers before he can buy a ticket for the next leg of his journey. He runs past the station and hides behind the wheels of some boxcars. Finally in desperation he jumps through a partially opened boxcar door to escape. As the boxcar jolts and starts moving he is startled and thinks, "I had crawled right under the wheels! What if it had moved then?" (35). Intertextually this comment by Danny parallels that by Owl near the conclusion of *Honour the Sun*, when she comments on the many deaths from trains: "The railway line ... take[s] so many lives ... Tony died trying to jump on a moving freight train last year" (209). As Gary Boire says in his essay "Wheels on Fire," trains can often be interpreted ironically in the literature by or about Native peoples. Euro-Canadians think of trains as unifying the country or the lifeblood of the country and yet they cut across the land invading it and causing the death of human, animal and plant life.

Train lines are implicated in the inappropriate re-settling of many groups of Indigenous peoples. Slipperjack's band was directed to re-settle near train lines and schools and other services were only provided on this condition.<sup>10</sup> The metaphorical interpretation of trains in *Honour the Sun* and in *Silent Words* provides an example of how Slipperjack takes a familiar experience from her own environment and creatively transforms it, resisting the interpretation put upon the experience by the dominant discourse society. She uses metaphors familiar in the

dominant discourse and usually inverts/translates them to demonstrate their meaning within the Indigenous culture. Danny never really begins his quest until he stops taking the train to escape from his father or to search for his mother. He must travel, usually with great difficulty, on foot, by canoe or on a komatik behind a skidoo in order to really journey anywhere and to progress on his transformative quest.

In *Silent Words* food provides a metaphorical design similar to that of trains. At the start of the novel, when Danny runs away, his family lives in town eating only store food. He is always hungry and is dependent on money to buy food. When he is jumping on trains and running from home to try to find his mother, Danny buys pop, chips, milk and cookies from stores. He often experiences harassment when doing this, and is chased, beaten and robbed by older white boys in the various towns where he travels. Many of the Native families he stops with feed him “delicious” meals of fish, bannock, etc. Almost all of the Indigenous food is obtained from the land by gathering, hunting or fishing. Other food, exchanged or shared by members of the community, is not related to a cash economy, but is directly related to the land or is bartered. In this novel the values around food provide a particularly clever contrast with foodways and values in the dominant Canadian culture where it is most often characterized in a linear fashion: plenty is better than scarcity, more wealth means better food and better nutrition; there is no relationship between the food source and the consumer and a middleman is always required; the only spiritual connection with food exists in church with communion; and the more refined a food is the more it is valued. All of these values are inverted in the novel. The cumulative food theme in the novel is developed by repetition and attention to detail. Food provides a metaphor for two world views with store food representing hierarchical white society with its market

economy, and land food symbolizing the sacred circle with its interconnectedness with all living beings as well as with tradition. James Anderson quotes ecologist Aldo Leopold as explaining that: “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect” (Anderson iv). That the food from the white society is not sustaining is made clear in *Honour the Sun* but in *Silent Words* such food is literally harmful and potentially deadly.

Food is seen as the source of identity quite literally in one of the final climactic scenes of *Silent Words*. After Danny has had his life saved by a pack of protectors (wolves), he is staying with Ol’ Jim in his winter camp. The elder serves Danny his first meal of beaver and while smoking a pipe, he shows him a ritual game he played as a boy with the hip bone of the beaver. Ol’ Jim instructs him to place his finger through the hole of the bone and repeat, “When I come home, I will come straight into this hole to find you” (225). Danny makes a mistake and says, “Hear me, hear me, when I come home, I will come straight into this hole to find me” (225). Ol’ Jim corrects him and says, “Boy, when you come home, you don’t just find yourself, you already got yourself! What you find are the people who love you” (225). Thus Slipperjack conveys in this scene a perfect, holistic circle of meaning, the inter-connectedness of people with animals and with each other in community. Just before he dies, Ol’ Jim, who has taught many skills and traditions by way of sharing food with Danny on a long journey they took together, helps him to repossess the sacred circle of spirituality with the meal of beaver. This scene seems complete in itself because tobacco, included in many important ceremonies and demonstrated earlier by two elders, is used by Ol’ Jim (he is smoking a pipe and blows tobacco toward the beaver bone) in ritualistic fashion.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast with the meal Danny shares with Ol' Jim is the store food offered to Danny when his father comes and gets him and takes him on a skidoo trip across the lake to Whitewater. Danny is still in a state of shock and exhaustion from his trip across the lake and the death of Ol' Jim. Stopping for lunch Danny gets wood for a small fire and his father takes French bread and garlic sausage out of his food box. Following that they eat chocolate bars with their tea and his father promises him a case of chips when they get back to the cabin. As the exhausted Danny and Daniel, his father, journey they talk, sharing news about the people Danny met on his quest for his mother. Stopping again for tea his father says, "we'll have a good meal," and he proceeds to take out more garlic sausage and a can of spaghetti. Despite having eaten lunch, Danny is very hungry. While this meal is heating Daniel tells his son that his mother is dead. In his debilitated state the boy cannot handle this news. Danny kicks over the fire, flings a snowshoe at his father and takes off across the lake after the two struggle in the snow. Entering a cabin he sees a gun and thinking his father has tricked him and is living with Sarah, the red-headed woman who abused him, he picks up a gun from under the bed; it discharges accidentally and wounds his father, paralyzing him for life. The meal just preceding this scene of confusion and fear contributes to Danny's suspicions that his father cannot be trusted and cannot in fact take care of him. Danny associates store food with the loss of his mother, since after she left Daniel began to live with Sarah, and they moved into town away from the traditional way of life on the land. From his journey with Ol' Jim Danny learned how to live off the land; in fact he could probably take care of himself and did not have to be taken care of as his father implied. Traditional food represents a way to enter the spiritual circle of continuity and connectedness with nature and with one another. It is the inseparable, intimate association of traditional food with the land which

creates part of the spiritual force of the novel.

Danny, the young male protagonist of *Silent Words*, finds his identity by repossessing his community—the land, his traditions and his people. The mother he seeks is dead but he finds what Old Indian called his spiritual mother, “mudder Eart” (55). The epilogue of the novel expands on the spiritual meaning of silence woven throughout and intertextually with *Honour the Sun*.

As Danny travels on his quest to find his mother, many people from the Native community teach him important cultural information. One of the most important things he is taught concerns the importance of silence. Greg Young-Ing notes in discussing traditional Aboriginal voice that “words are substantiated through the act of being spoken or stated,” and quotes Armstrong describing a central instruction of her Nation as the practice of “quietness” and listening (“Aboriginal” 179). The first family Danny stops with demonstrate silence as a response to an inappropriate question. After Danny shares a meal with the family the eldest boy, Bobby, begins carving a wooden spoon. Danny asks in English, “Why don’t you just go and buy a spoon and not have to go through such pains to make one?” (32). The response is a “deep silence” (32).

Danny’s next lesson is explicit. As he was getting on the train after spending time with another generous Ojibwa family, Charlie the father ruffles his hair and says that his grandfather used to tell him “to always listen, watch and learn” (45). But it is not until Danny spends some time with an elderly Indian couple that he learns to practise silent communication.

In the home of the old Indian couple who speak only with a strangely accented English, Danny observes the pipe ritual and the silence accompanying it (56). The old woman instructs Danny to observe: “use your eyes an feel inside you what da udder is feelin” (60). Danny seems

quick and eager to repossess the culture he was born into and has temporarily lost. Danny notices other dimensions of silence: for example, the rare silence of nature after a hail storm. Walking out after the storm Danny thinks, “we seemed noisy, out of place, as our footsteps broke the silence” (175). Silently assisting a neighbour to clean fish, he is handed one to take home without any words being spoken (201). As discussed later in this thesis, Slipperjack expresses silence in all of her work and in various ways. However, in *Silent Words* the connection between silence, ritual or ceremony and the land/community is expanded upon. Although we learn the basic tenets of silence in Ojibway culture along with the narrator, the ritualistic and sacred uses of silence are not commented upon but merely mentioned, allowing for its significance to the appropriate audience. The title, *Silent Words*, is an oxymoron and it points to the complexity of this aspect of Anishinaube spirituality. According to Abrams’s history of this literary technique, oxymorons were used to express “the Christian mysteries, which transcend human sense and logic” (119). This description of silence as mystery could apply to Slipperjack’s representation of the meaning of silence in Ojibway culture.

In respect to silence there appears to be many inversions in *Silent Words*. However, Slipperjack may be simply expressing her Indigenous world view which differs greatly from a Western viewpoint. Dean Bavington discusses the Western idea of the domination of nature, how since the Renaissance or before, the Western world has experienced nature as silent and passive and this enabled its exploitation (78). Christianity reinforces this view of nature. When Danny most misses his mother, his emotional loss is experienced physically in his throat where the voice is located: “Mama, help me! My face was wet and it felt like a big hand was squeezing me around my throat” (23). In Slipperjack’s writing people interact with nature and it is far from

silent.

Slipperjack displays what Joanne Neff refers to as the significantly different thematic and rhetorical strategies used by Native writers; Neff writes that “in Native texts non-human subjects speak. People can receive power from animals ...” (85). Wolves, for example, are acknowledged for their role in saving Danny’s life when he falls off the skidoo on the frozen lake. Intentional, intelligent behaviour is attributed to these animals, when Ned, one of the men who was present, says, “That kid has some pretty strong protectors!” (222).

Traditional precepts such as the meanings of silence in Ojibway culture are presented in *Silent Words* within a contemporary consciousness, often with humour and devoid of stereotyped images. For example, after Danny has learned to wait silently for the old Indian to say grace before meals, he waits silently before his first meal at Henry’s house. Henry’s father Jim says, “Are you waiting for Grace? Sorry, but she doesn’t live here” (68). Then in mock deference to the Christian tradition, Jim says, “Okay I will say one. Thank-you Billy for the fish, and I will remember to give you one ... Amen” (69). Thus the Indigenous values are celebrated with humour while Christian customs are lightly acknowledged. Slipperjack’s ambiguous, paradoxical, and often humorous style with such Indigenous themes as silence or food/land discourages anthropological, linear, scientific interpretations of her work. It is through such dialogical processes that, according to Neff, Native writers “may be able both to question the ways in which they are constrained by certain customs and to learn from and build on these very models” (95).

Emergent First Nations writers like Slipperjack have their feet in two worlds. In both of her novels Slipperjack’s young protagonists experience this world as well. A contemplation of

Nature in *Silent Words* offers Danny an opportunity to ponder the challenges of growing in two worlds at once. Danny goes for a swim and notices some long weeds growing under water:

Then the tall weeds brushed my hands. They were very straight and tight, as if the ground under the water held them tightly, while at the same time they were pulled hard to the surface of the water by the sun. That must be a very difficult place to grow. They were pulled from both directions at the same time. (148)

This metaphor of growth within the tensions of opposites is consistent with Slipperjack's vision throughout this novel.

In the epilogue Danny again ponders silence. Discussing the spiritually-oriented Native sensibility, Maracle explains to Kelly: "It's all story, memory stored up. And coming to grips with our spiritual subjectivity, coming to grips with it socially and personally" ("Coming" 85). True to the traditional style of Aboriginal narratives, the novel does not tell the reader what to think and much ambiguity remains at the end of the novel, particularly for the non-Native reader. There is a mood of hope and many loose ends are neatly tied up in a fashion familiar to western literary tradition. However, Danny's memories are not all happy ones. Despite his impending marriage to his childhood friend Charlotte, he has not reconciled all of his past, especially the confusion and guilt he feels about injuring his father. "Something happened to me that awful night. I have never understood what" (249). Significantly Danny says, "my voice didn't work for the longest time" (250). This provides a subtle reminder to the reader of how far and how important a journey Danny has taken to tell his story. "You can't escape the silent words of your memory" is Danny's ambiguous, bittersweet conclusion (250). This statement is true for the paradoxical position of Native people today in Canada. Memory is filled with horrors and devastation, yet it also carries traditional spirituality and the means to heal and repossess the

sacred circle. Now mature, Danny can live with this ambiguity.

### **Conclusion: Association by Embodiment**

In her “Preface or Here Are Our Voices—Who Will Hear?,” Emma LaRocque states:

To discuss Native literature is to tangle with a myriad of issues: voicelessness, accessibility, stereotypes, appropriation, ghettoization, linguistic, cultural, sexual, and colonial roots of experience, and therefore, of self-expression—all issues that bang at the door of conventional notions about Canada and about literature. (xv)

Slipperjack offers the reader a glimpse of the positive, sacred connectedness in her world as well as honestly conveying the above mentioned ambiguities inherent in being a Native Canadian writer. Ways of knowing, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, are dependent upon metaphor and Slipperjack demonstrates in her work a different way of knowing depending less upon the abstract code metaphor and more related to what Douglas Freake refers to as the holistic and organic metaphor of “embodiment” (248). Slipperjack uses the gathering, preparing and eating of food, and other situated experiences such as knitting a fish net or painfully negotiating difficult portages as well as the various social manifestations of silence to “embody” meaning in her novel.<sup>12</sup> The power of Slipperjack’s work comes from her ability to convey connectedness to the earth and to place.

Sylvia Bowerbank and Delores Wawia attribute a bio-regional ecological wisdom to Slipperjack’s fiction and demonstrate how her literature contributes to “cultural homemaking, that is, to the reclamation of ways of knowing and living in one’s home place” (226). They point out how the novels “celebrate the distinctiveness of knowing and caring for one specific place: one’s home ground” (225). Slipperjack’s work resists codification and commodification by

remaining embodied and in place.

Thomas King describes Slipperjack's writing in terms of what it offers Native readers. Her associational literature contributes richly to the retention, reclamation and repossession of her Indigenous heritage.

## Chapter Four

### Writing in the Language of the Enemy: Strategies of Resistance; Listening to the Silence

Language holds a central place in the discussion of postcolonial and First Nations literatures. This is due to the colonizer's imposition of language and all of the oppression connected with this act. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sees the role of language as primary: "[t]he first question to be asked of a piece of ... fiction is the author's relationship to the creative use of his or her native language" ("Feminism" 165). A pivotal issue around language for postcolonial writers and critics is the awareness of its association with power. This has focused more interest on language in contemporary critiques. Erasure of traditional orature, closely tied to culture, is one common result of an imperially imposed language.

In *Empire and Communications*, Harold Innis postulates that the strong oral tradition of the Greeks enabled them to resist the tendencies of empire and absolutism in the areas of religion and politics (84). Writing, according to Innis, is correlated with space. In the foreword to Innis's book, Marshall McLuhan points out that Innis repeatedly emphasizes the destructiveness of both literacy and the focus on the visual, "stressing the fact that command over territorial space usually goes with neglect of time, tradition, and stability" (2). In the literary arts some postcolonial writers, for example Ngugi wa Thiong'o, have carefully analyzed the politics of colonial language and argued for a return to Indigenous languages. Others such as Chinua Achebe take the opposite view. Many of those who have opted to write in English are using it as a tool of resistance or are experimenting with non-standard variations of English to adapt it to their Indigenous audiences.

Feminist theory suggests that women are doubly colonized when it comes to language,

first by the imperial power and then by patriarchal language.<sup>1</sup> Silence has many dimensions in the writings of marginalized women. Western feminist thought considers silence primarily as a muting or gagging of women's voices by patriarchal power or by a language unsuited to their experience. Silence, however, can also be a form of resistance or subversion; it may also represent denial. Ruby Slipperjack's novel *Honour the Sun* introduces a spiritual dimension to silence and in it Slipperjack addresses silence in an explicit way. As is the case with Buchi Emecheta's novels, Slipperjack's novels contain other forms of silence as well in the gaps in the narrative or an absence of certain expected themes or content. Exile and silence are often related.

Despite the oppressive erasure of Indigenous languages, creative ways of dealing with the imposed language have developed in many cultures and literature has benefitted from this. New "Englishes" are constantly evolving and writers are experimenting with ways of communicating them in writing. Post-European writing may contain resonances of both Indigenous language and oral tradition. These oral and Indigenous language connections may be less accessible to European readers. Such features are likely to be more apparent to the audience sharing the author's culture.

A large conceptual area of non-verbal communication exists in all cultures. Slipperjack mentions the importance in Anishinaube culture of intuitive communication during her interview with Hartmut Lutz: "We are raised," she says, "in a non-verbal culture" (*Contemporary* 212). In *Silent Words* Slipperjack demonstrates that much of the life of her people is contained and lived and communicated non-verbally. Kinesthetic or body language is used in everyday communication and non-humans communicate with humans. The writings of Emecheta and Slipperjack emerge from a strong oral tradition. Walter Ong points to the primacy of orality and

the dependency of thought and writing on it: “written texts all have to be related somehow directly or indirectly to the world of sound” (8). Because of this relationship with sound, Ong believes that “writing did not reduce orality but enhanced it” (9). Gaps of untranslatable, perishable communication are greater in written texts from cultures with recent or still surviving oral traditions than in texts from other cultures. In that sense the texts are more delicate and vulnerable to mis(missed)interpretation particularly for non-Anishnaube or non-Igbo audiences. The weaving of oral texture into their novels has enriched the works of Emecheta and Slipperjack.

In an interview with David Goleman, Gregory Bateson, well-known thinker and anthropologist, discusses the limitations of our language: “We as Westerners, think in transitive terms—something acts on, or is like or unlike, something else” (Goleman 44). Bateson points out the limits of our ethos, stating that “our language—and so our thinking—only lets us construct it in a lineal fashion and not as a whole circuit” (Goleman 44). Languages found in traditions outside of the west differ in their scope. Nigerian Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, distinguishes the Western from the African world view by the latter’s “conjunction of the circumcentric worlds of man, social community and Nature” all considered by Africans to be essential for the moral order (52). The “whole circuit” sounds very much like the sacred circle of Amerindian belief which Slipperjack conveys in her writing. Emecheta’s use of Pidgin and of Igbo words like “chi” show her defiance in not translating that which is untranslatable and in breaking the rules of standard English usage. Thus there are philosophical barriers for non-European writers in creatively representing their world views in the English language.

Emecheta and Slipperjack retain their mother-tongue languages while they write in

English; but they are exiled from the setting in which this mother tongue is embedded. This chapter will look at some issues of colonization and language and will discuss some of the language strategies Slipperjack and Emecheta use in their work. Dimensions of silence will be explored first as they pertain to women's writing generally, and then as they are relative to the specific novels and their cultural traditions.

### **Carrying Multiple Yokes**

English is my father tongue. A father tongue is a foreign language not a mother tongue.  
Marlene Nourbese Philip, "Discourse on the Logic of Language" 1989 (56)

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice.  
Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language" 1964 (102)

The residential school is where I was taught to be ashamed of who I was ... If you haven't got a language, you can't say "I am."  
Pauline Pelley, "Neglect, Disarray and Disappearance" 1994 (7)

Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture.... It is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues.  
Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Decolonizing the Mind" 1986 (460)

Many of the issues raised thirty years ago by Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe, about the irony of writing in the colonizer's language and the dangers and benefits of doing so apply to postcolonial writing today. Arguing pragmatically, Achebe came to the conclusion that writing in English is the best option for authors from African countries formerly colonized by Britain. To support this position, Achebe called upon two English language writers with slave backgrounds. One was Olaudah Equiano, a freed Igbo slave who lived in England and published his

autobiography in 1789; the other, James Baldwin, Achebe's contemporary, was a Black American. Achebe concluded that he had a personal onus to use the language to reflect his experience and not to imitate Anglo writers: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English" (103). At that time he predicted a bright future for the novel and forecast that the language would not continue to be imitative of standardized English but would reflect the mother tongues and cultures of those who used it. Achebe expressed the wish at this time that regional ethnic literatures, written in original mother tongues, would gain recognition as well as the national literatures written in English. He hoped that "ethnic literatures would flourish side by side with the national [English] ones" (102).

Since that essay Achebe has become enormously popular both internationally and in his own homeland. His works do get "translated" into Igbo and I have heard him read his poetry in Igbo to large audiences. Interviewed in 1992 by Feroza Jussawalla and Reid Way Dasenbrock, Achebe holds much the same opinion about his career. Dismissing the label of "orature," he declares: "I have a strong belief in the story" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 80). Now he is more adamant in his insistence on a place for all views on language and on a space for dissent about it. Achebe, who currently lives in exile in the United States, continues to speak eloquently on behalf of his own country in the borrowed language. Other African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o represent the converse of Achebe's position.

Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o followed a similar pattern to Achebe's throughout the sixties and early seventies. Ngugi's novels and plays were written and published in English and were extremely well received. In 1976-77 as a result of drama work with a rural, Gikuyu community, Ngugi questioned who his audience was when only a very small number of people in

his own country could read English. Ngugi now only writes in his mother tongue, Gikuyu. Jussawalla and Dasenbrock clearly state in their preface to an interview with Ngugi in 1992 that in 1988 “Ngugi made a firm restatement of his personal and literary conviction that African literatures must be written in African languages” (25). During detention in 1978 by the neo-colonial Kenyan government, he “abandoned writing in English as the medium of his creative expression” and since 1987 he has stopped translating his own works (25).

In 1981 African critic Lewis Nkosi felt that he was not being “duly alarmist” in claiming that much African literature is being created in a state of “profound anxiety, even panic” (1). This is because of the language issue. The literature being produced lacks relevance because “80 percent of the African people enjoy no literacy” (1). Nkosi pointed out the irony of using the enslaver’s language(s) even when “an assault had to be made on those opposing values used to control colonial subjects” (2).

In “Decolonizing the Mind” Ngugi argues that “Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis” (461). He further makes the case for the centrality of language in the formation of personal and community identity. Ngugi grew up in the Kenya of the 1950s when the British imposed English in the school system by force. While attending school at the time, Ngugi was personally affected and felt that the replacement of Kenyan orature with English literature “[took] us further and further from ourselves to other selves” (459). “What is really happening now,” Ngugi explained to Jussawalla in 1992, “is that African thought is imprisoned in foreign languages” (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 30). Ultimately in this interview it became apparent that Ngugi applies his dogmatic stance as a general argument but he allows that “[i]ndividual writers must use whatever language best suits their particular situation”

(Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 27). Ngugi, in exile in Britain, continues to write in Gikuyu but told Jussawalla that “[a] writer needs his own home and society around him” (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 33). He more and more finds his inspiration from his oral tradition. Between Achebe and Ngugi a middle ground exists.

Gabriel Okara, a Nigerian writer who has experimented with representing his language, Ijaw, in his novels written in English, discusses his idea about language in “African Speech ... English Words.” Okara believes that those who think that an African sensibility will always be apparent in an African writer’s work are mistaken and perhaps undervalue or dismiss the importance of “turns of phrase, the nuances and imagery which abound in African languages ...” (137). He asks: “Is it only the colour of one’s skin that makes one an African?” (138). His method of transfusing his English works with vernacular life is to abstain from writing his thoughts first in English and to first explore in depth “each Ijaw expression [he] use[s] and to discover the probable situation in which it [is] used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English” (137). Okara feels that he can imbue English with the “poetic and beautiful” by flavoring it with Ijaw (138).

Buchi Emecheta uses language in a complex manner incorporating ideas similar to both of the extremes discussed above by Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Her work, as it is evolving, bears more similarity in language to Achebe’s than it does to Ngugi’s. Her cultural background is similar to Achebe’s. However, her commitment to articulating the treatment of women in African and British society is parallel to Ngugi’s commitment to attacking neo-colonialism. Emecheta’s way of doing it is distinctly her own and she is constantly experimenting and changing her style of writing.

Emecheta uses ironic and satirical discourse laced with oral influences to deconstruct misogyny and colonialism. For example, in *The Bride Price*, during the funeral for Aku-nna's father, there is a conflict between the Christians and non-Christians. Emecheta's irony can be heard in the narrator's comment that some of the mourners "preferred Nna to go to heaven because heaven sounded purer, cleaner" (52). The privileging of the sounds of words is consistent with the oral cultural setting of the novel and the conflict described suggests the ambivalence of colonial Christianity imposed upon traditional spiritual beliefs. Unlike many male writers, Emecheta identifies the inseparability of indigenous and colonial oppression of women. As a result of her life experiences, Emecheta privileges class and gender struggles in her earlier novels rather than aesthetics, colonialism, or race. In Britain she became aware of language as a marker of social class just as the acquisition of the English language was a marker in Nigeria of education/success. In her autobiography, *Head Above Water*, Emecheta explains why, at one point in her life, when she needed social assistance, she shied away from her Ibo friends.

They would not understand that when people reached the bottom of the ditch, they needed each other. It did not matter which colour or what educational background, one had to be friends with them [her English co-residents in welfare housing] for survival. My Ibo friends and relatives would not be able to see beyond their *rough language and obvious poverty*. But I could: I lived with them and had seen the warmth of their hearts. (39, emphasis mine)

The interplay between language and experience is complex in Emecheta's world and her early works analyze this and explore the insecurity she feels about writing. Yet even in her earlier work Emecheta uses imposed British literary traditions in an ironic and subversive way in order to develop her dominant theme of triumph over male oppression. In *Second-Class Citizen* Adah,

the author's alter-ego, frets about Francis, her husband, because of his job as mailman. Francis complains bitterly about the dangers of delivering the mail. Adah is physically very weak, recovering from a difficult birth, and in her mind the exertions and the dangers Francis is exposed to while delivering mail become compared to "the picture of the man Christian, dressed shabbily like Robinson Crusoe, climbing a steep hill with a staff in his hand, puffing and puffing" (140). Adah then relates Francis's experiences to Shakespeare's comments: "It was brutal of Shakespeare to say that 'Cowards die many times before their deaths,' because the cowards really suffer" (141). Emecheta clearly juxtaposes Adah's thoughts with English canonical texts of Shakespeare and patriarchal literary classics such as *Pilgrim's Progress*. Adah later observes that such literary images distanced her from the reality of recognizing Francis for what he is, lazy and indifferent to the needs of his family. Adah comprehends the extent of her vulnerability, in her weakened state, to both the English classics and Francis's inflated stories and "[a]nger welled up inside her" (141). Thus, Adah resists the messages of these canonical, patriarchal texts written in the imperial language at the same time that she distances herself from her husband's oppression.

Peter Hitchcock's *Dialogics of the Oppressed* points out that marginalized people are not merely reactive but that "their multiplicity of voices (polyvocality or polyphony as Bakhtin would have it) constitutes a form of cultural agency at specific moments in history" (xvi). In the above example of Francis and Adah, Emecheta demonstrates a great deal of craft in articulating a number of voices in her work. As Emecheta develops as a novelist she experiments with more complex dialogue and multiple voicing.

In her novel *Kehinde* Emecheta uses sophisticated language and multiple voicing to

express themes of neo-colonialism and identity. However, she still exposes the weaknesses of the English language and points at the implications language has for a culture. For example, when the young Kehinde returns to her family after an absence of many years, she is trying to understand her place in the family. Her father explains that in their culture “few people are raised by their real parents” (79), and points out that she can call many women in her life mother. Then an elderly woman, “big mother,” pointed out that “educated people call their little mothers ‘seesita’” (79). One of the boys of the family who was attending King’s College pointed out that actually Kehinde’s siblings were half-sisters/brothers. The listening men then declare: “No wonder the white people’s country is a place of everyone for himself ... Children of the same father calling each other ‘half’” (80). Although the conversation is humorous and focuses on language, it is actually an interrogation of English culture. Emecheta’s degree in sociology may have influenced her vocabulary when writing her early novels. Her strength, however, lies in her rootedness in her Nigerian languages (Ibo and Yoruba) and in other aspects of her culture.

The use of English language came later in Emecheta’s life than these early influences. “I started speaking the English language when I was fourteen. So I can never really fill those fourteen years in which I had another mode of expressing myself,” Emecheta explains (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 99). In *Second-Class Citizen* the narrator explains that Igbos particularly valued schools at which “children were not taught Yoruba or any African languages” (9). Later in *Kehinde*, Emecheta explores the results of elevating the language of the colonizer. Kehinde’s friend, Moriammo, comments in the novel that “she had never met a language with so many rules that could be broken” (101).

The blatant colonialism of Emecheta’s early education is vividly described in her

autobiography *Head Above Water*. Her choice of educational anecdotes is interesting as it centres both on her desire to be a writer and on the imposed language of her education, English. After being expelled from class and told to take a bad mark for declaring that she intended to become a writer, Emecheta concludes:

Miss Humble probably felt that her language was too good for the likes of me to want to use as a means of expression. But that was the only language I was being taught to write. If I spoke my Ibo language or any other Nigerian one in the compound, I would be given a bad mark or asked to pay a fine. And why did she take the trouble to leave her island home and come and teach us her language in the first place? (22)

In an interview with Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, Emecheta claims, “my emotional language is Ibo” (98). She later rhetorically asks Olga Kenyon, “Shall I write in my emotional language? If I do who will publish it? Who will read it?” (48). Emecheta poignantly describes to Kenyon her feelings of marginalization resulting from the imposition of colonial language: “We carry multiple yokes, we hide another person in another language” (48). She confides to Jussawalla that “all metaphors and images of my mother tongue are lost” (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 48). Nevertheless she explains to them that she has begun to play with language by translating from Ibo much in the way Okara describes.

Thirty years later Achebe’s positive predictions about African writers’ successful use of English are proving to be accurate. However, the problems he described remain for African writers<sup>2</sup> and pose similar difficulties for First Nations writers.

### **The Language of the Enemy**

In Canada, the multiplicity of First Nations languages is complicated by their

disappearance as a result of ethnic oppression. According to The Assembly of First Nations Language Secretariat, only “12% of First Nations communities in Canada have flourishing languages” (6). The residential school system created early in this century and continuing until the late 1970s effectively erased many First Nations languages.<sup>3</sup> Within the residential schools, which were designed to produce assimilation, severe punishments were applied to the students who tried to speak in their mother tongues. Thus Slipperjack and Emecheta shared the same experience in acquiring their English language skills. Unlike Nigeria, school attendance was compulsory for Canadian Native children. Many Native people still feel currently colonized and the erosion of traditional languages is a glaring symbol of this colonization. Marie AnnHarte Baker feels that English became an “Enemy Language” as a result of the “colonizers or settlers” approaching “everything Native, natural, or necessary for North American survival as an enemy” (“Borrowing” 59, 60). Baker further states: “When I speak of English as the enemy’s language, I see the enemy as being written within the individual person—within one’s own language” (61).

Exile imposed by the Canadian school system created an impetus for Slipperjack to write. Slipperjack, who left home for residential school at age eleven or twelve, missed the story telling which was a part of her family life and so started writing her own stories. As she explained to Lutz: “The more I think about it, perhaps the writing had something to do with me going away to residential school” (*Contemporary* 203).

The language choices Slipperjack makes in her writing are highly influenced by the political realities of her people. Slipperjack’s mother tongue is Anishnawbe and it is one of the most flourishing Aboriginal languages in North America. Though Ojibway is still a viable language, it too was weakened by the only recently terminated, culturally destructive residential

school system. In many parts of Ontario only twenty percent of the children speak Ojibway (Fox, "Speaking" A24). Asked by Lutz why she did not use Anishnawbe words and provide a footnote Slipperjack replied: "No, because I would break the thought, or the flow. I didn't want to intrude on this girl's story. I am trying to be totally out of there altogether" (*Contemporary* 206). The only exception to the absence of Anishnawbe language in Slipperjack's texts occurs on the rare occasion when there is no translatable word available, usually words relating to Native spirituality. For example, in the novel *Silent Words* Danny suddenly sees a strange looking hermit appear, seemingly from nowhere, and he asks Ol'Jim, "Is he one of the Memegwesiwag?" (148). Although Slipperjack seldom employs non-English words, she comments a great deal on the use of Ojibway language and on inter-species communication. On his trip with Ol'Jim Danny begins to listen carefully to bird sounds. He asks Ol'Jim: "Why do people say 'the lonely call of a loon?'" (159). "Ol'Jim chuckled and said, 'Well when you don't understand the language, all the voices sound the same, don't they?'" (159). Some Native writers see ways to use the English language to their benefit. Janice Acoose writes in *Neither Princesses Nor Easy Squaws* that "it is vitally important that Indigenous women appropriate the english [sic] language in order to represent our experiences" (58).

Anishnawbe language instructors point out the essential differences between English and Ojibway. Marie McGregor Pitawanakwat notes that:

Many things can be explained in the Anishnawbe language, but lose their meaning, colour, or humour by translating them into English. The Anishnawbe language is precise and descriptive ... (73)

Joy Asham Fedorick states that "something is lost in the translation. Especially when one language is noun-based and thing-oriented (i.e., English) and the other is visual and movement

oriented (i.e., Aboriginal languages)” (“Running” 145).

In *Honour the Sun* Slipperjack does not translate from Ojibway into English but she attempts to create parallel situations. “I devise situations where the English language would fit, still keeping the Native content intact.... So the feeling comes across” (Lutz, *Contemporary* 206). Slipperjack nevertheless expressed to Lutz that Ojibway is her language of choice for communicating with intensity and feeling.

For First Nations’ writers, naming is important. Inappropriate, dehistoricized English language labels are one of the first hurdles that Indigenous people must overcome. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, an Ojibway writer, describes how European names affect her:

How I loathe the term “Indian” ... “Indian” is a term used to sell things—souvenirs, cigars, cigarettes, gasoline, cars ... “Indian” is a figment of white man’s imagination. (qtd. in Ronald Wright ix)

Slipperjack pays attention to naming in her novels. In some notable instances Slipperjack chooses to deny important characters formal names. Such characters are identified several ways: by their role in the community as a whole, by their role within the narrator’s life, or by subtle mythological or spiritual allusions. Examples of the former two ways of naming are found in Slipperjack’s descriptive names for her characters. The couple who Danny, the narrator of *Silent Words*, lives with briefly are referred to as “the old man” and “the old lady.” Similarly in *Honour the Sun*, Owl’s “Teacher” does not have a formal name. Examples of the latter way of naming are the “Town Joker” and “The Medicine Man” in *Honour the Sun*. In this novel naming becomes associated with the narrator’s identity and this taps into cultural and ancestral identity. Near the end of the novel when the heroine has returned home on holidays, she meets the Medicine Man and he reminds her of her Anishinaube name “Owl.” She laughs, “I laugh thinking I haven’t

heard that name since I was a kid” (211). In getting Owl, the narrator, to tell the story of her name he enables her to recall its context and her inherited identity.<sup>4</sup> The Medicine Man suggests to Owl too that she has not, as she fears, lost the traditional family she had as a young girl. Pointing at Owl’s childhood home now abandoned and seemingly empty in her eyes, he says, “who’s to say that your voices don’t still echo deep within” (211). All of these techniques contextualize and historicize Owl’s threatened identity and remind her how to retain it. Acoose notes the importance of such messages for Indigenous people for “re-naming and re-defining people and places based in the Indigenous people’s own ideological context” (*Neither* 58). Slipperjack, in her unique way, may be forging an accessible link to, or continuation of, her ancestral past.

## Silence

A friend writes that she can no longer bear to look at words—even bill boards from the bus window are excessive. Print-dead, she says. I dream that I am a fish: ancient Egypt’s symbol of silence.

Lola Lemire Tostevin, *Cartouches* n.p.

Silence is an important part of power dynamics and the domination over nature. The Western world has experienced nature as silent and this has allowed for it to be exploited.

Dean Bavington, “Stepping Back” 78

Subalterity produces not only voices but strategic silences ... silence itself as a “language” of transgression.

Peter Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* xvii

Native American literature suggests a philosophical awareness of all things, their resonances, their places in the sacred hoop ... silence determines sound ... the essential words depend ... upon [the] silence from which they spring.

Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* 48

The concept of silence contains depth and complexity. As Tostevin's prose poem demonstrates, the concept of silence is connected with an ancient, pre-colonial past, yet it resonates today. Colonial and neo-colonial cultures view silence as absence and therefore respond negatively to it. This can be countered with an aggressive/transgressive use of silence. Indigenous American writers pay particular attention to silence both as a political message of powerlessness and as a positive spiritual force and connection with the sacred circle. Slipperjack's incorporation of silence in her work falls largely into the latter category. In each of her novels silence is central.

Slipperjack may be tapping into an ancient and important heritage of healing in her complex presentation of silence in her stories. As Tostevin's prose poem indicates ancient Egyptians did represent silence in their hieroglyphic writing. Beth Brant comments on the reservoirs of silence: "I feel that these sacred silences are the places from which we write. That place has not been touched or stained by imperialism and hatred" (*Writing* 20).

In "The Discourse on Language" Michel Foucault states that "if we truly require silence to cure our monsters, then it must be an attentive silence" (217). In *Honour the Sun* Owl's mother directs Owl to listen to the silence in order to cope with conflict (184). Owl tries this and finds that she is attentive to her own body and to the sounds of nature and feels a sense of calmness. As Foucault notes, speech is not the expression of conflicts but "it is the very object of man's conflicts" (Foucault 216). Silence is significant in *Honour the Sun* in content and in form.

Owl is silent in her narration about the non-Native world she occupies while away at school. The reader has to guess or read between the lines to determine how she must have felt coping with a unilingual English world and very different urban life. The hints are present in the text, however, for the discerning reader, or for the Native reader who has experienced similar events. *Silent Words* elaborates on and explains the silences in *Honour the Sun*.<sup>5</sup> The last paragraph of *Silent Words* illuminates facets of silence:

You can't escape the silent words of your memory. They grow on you layer after layer, year after year, documenting you from beginning to end, from the core to the surface. (250)

This passage indicates the profundity of messages conveyed silently, their tenacity and importance in character formation. Slipperjack, in her interview with Lutz, indicates that she has placed "communication between the lines" which she hopes will be read/understood by Native readers (*Contemporary* 213). Slipperjack's inclusion of such silences in her work alludes to both subversiveness (towards her non-Native readers) and continuity with her traditional, oral Anishinaube spiritual inheritance.

Form and content demonstrate silence but so too does the inability of the non-Native reader to understand the missing pieces. In a review of *Honour the Sun*, Gloria Hilderbrandt calls the novel unbalanced because it is "curiously detached about what must have been the most painful experiences, such as her mother's descent into alcoholism, and her decision to remarry" (98). In criticizing the novel's structure Hilderbrandt calls *Honour the Sun* "notes that seem more like raw material than a finished novel" (95). Non-Native readers interpret huge gaps in this novel, gaps which can be viewed as silence.

Two ways in which silence is important in *Honour the Sun* and in *Silent Words* are in the

refusal to say the unsayable and the subversiveness of “gaps” or absences in content or form. The explicit and implicit meanings of silence in these novels have spiritual foundations which require respectful probing for understanding to emerge. One suspects that only partial understanding can be achieved by the non-Native audience. This may not be coincidental.

Thomas King points to a certain awareness of responsibilities towards the Native community on the part of Native authors. Though these responsibilities are not sharply defined, they do lead to silences in the work (Rooke 73-74). The silences serve two purposes: to reassure Native audiences that you are not telling too much; the inclusion of Native audiences, because often the silences or “gaps” are understood or filled in by Native readers (Rooke 74). Slipperjack informed Lutz during their interview that she is hoping that Native audiences can read “the unwritten communication between the lines!” (213).

An explicit admonition to attend to the silence comes from Owl’s mother as described in Chapter 3. Delia quietly tells Owl, “Always listen to the silence” (184). Owl asks herself, “How do you listen to the silence when silence doesn’t have a noise? Or does it?” (184). She proceeds to listen to the disparate noises including her own heartbeat and discovers a calmness which she relies upon frequently as a solution to the chaotic changes in her body and the world around her (185). In the final chapter of *Honour the Sun* the importance of silence is reiterated. Owl meets the Medicine Man, remembers the importance of silence, and says, “the silence is always within you” (211). The subversiveness of silence is suggested in this passage. The power of silence and its independence from outside forces is evident as well. Outside forces from white culture have oppressed Native peoples and political dialogue and treaties have been used repeatedly to dispossess First Nations people. The Medicine Man, according to Basil Johnston, is considered

in Ojibway tradition to be an example of great moral and spiritual integrity as well as being a healer (*Ojibway Heritage* 83-87). This knowledge might cause Native readers to pay more attention to such teachings. Both the Medicine Man and Owl's mother have passed on the importance of silence to this younger person. The means of passing this wisdom on (voices of the elders) and the emphasis on the aural sense demonstrate a continuity with oral traditions.

Silence for many feminist theorists is important for its implications of strictures, powerlessness and limitations. Caution may be in order so that non-Native readers may not too readily apply the same meaning to silence in a Native-authored text. Ruby Slipperjack herself cautioned against this, asking "how are you going to put all this non-verbal communication that is going on back and forth into words and English on top of that!" (Lutz, *Contemporary* 212). The difference in silence, then, is based on the constraints and characteristics of the English language and on Ojibway cultural traditions.

In *Honour the Sun* Slipperjack's choice of language, diction, style and structure reflect her attempt to participate in her traditional culture within the political limitations of mainstream Canadian society. Native readers may read between the lines and intuit some of the richness of story from their oral traditions. On the other hand, non-Native readers must be ever respectful of this silence which they may not fully appreciate.

The transcultural transmission of silence is perhaps less deliberate and less prominent in the writings of Buchi Emecheta. In Emecheta's total body of work there are many silences, some of which are not accessible to the western critic. Others we probably do not even suspect. *Second-Class Citizen* is largely set in England, far away from the author's childhood home of Nigeria. The details of the narrator Adah's interaction with the foreign mainstream culture are

offered to the reader explicitly. However, the gaps and absences in Emecheta's work constitute another form of silence.

*Kehinde* presents a complicated, postcolonial silence positioning the main character as an exile in Britain while at the same time incorporating the Igbo spiritual concept of chi. When Kehinde is in Nigeria her chi is silent, but when she returns to her house in England this inner voice returns.

Emecheta explicitly and effectively explores the silence between women in *Kehinde*. There are many silences when Kehinde travels home to Nigeria and these silences are used to demonstrate the politics of the reconstituted polygamous family. When Kehinde violates protocol for example she is censored by looks, not by open confrontation. Back in England, the articulation of silence between cross-cultural women of various social classes demonstrates how they are complicit in their own and each other's oppression.

Kehinde, while working as maid in a hotel, is requested by a rich Arab sheikh to teach his wives English. Kehinde feels humiliated by the man's manner and assumptions and her inner voice urges her to do "something crude and violent" (128). She wishes to refuse the order but "she could not afford to refuse" (128). She remains silent. One day while she is tutoring, the sheikh directs Kehinde to take off her clothes. In her panic at this abuse "Kehinde opened and closed her mouth, like a fish gasping for air" (131). She walks out, and quits the job without uttering a word. She does not confide in her Nigerian co-worker at the hotel, reticent because "she could not put words to what was going on in her head" (133). Kehinde feels her experience is trivialized when she tells her story to the woman at the employment agency. The damage resulting from this multi-faceted silence is vividly articulated in this part of the novel through the

thoughts of the protagonist. The reader feels that the author is breaking the oppressive silence about such abuse commonly experienced by immigrant women.

### **Conclusion: Reading the Margins**

Reading resistance in the language of the enemy and recognizing silence made audible/printable may prove difficult for a European audience. There are fewer figures of speech on which the reader can rely to add dimension. Explanations and expansions may seem less than adequate. The writers may expect their audience to rely upon their oral roots to fill in the gaps. The reference to canonical literature customarily relied upon is minimalized, abrogated or inverted rather than used intertextually as a referent for the writing.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her discussion of "Feminism in Decolonization," guides the transcultural reader of fiction to first consider "the author's relationship to the creative use of his or her native language" (141). She also directs attention to the relationship between dominant *literature* and subordinate *orature*. As we have seen, both Emecheta and Slipperjack consider that their original languages with strong oral roots best express emotive facets of their lives. These languages are not readily available to them for creative expression due to economics or forced erasure. Thus both Slipperjack and Emecheta are writing in a language imposed by force. In the case of Slipperjack, when she attended residential school she was removed from the land, the environment in which her mother tongue is embedded. This is an experience only shared by a small portion of the audience. Slipperjack and Emecheta have in Audre Lorde's words, been "forged in the crucibles of difference" (112). Keeping in mind that despite an apparent linguistic cohesiveness, dislocation exists, the model of the palimpsest may help the Anglophone reader to

a better appreciation of the novels.

Chantal Zabus proposes, in her work on authors writing in the ex-colonizers' language, those as she says who are "writing back to the centre," that the reader seek "the original text hidden behind translation" ("Under" 268). The metaphor of a palimpsest enables such a reading in that the Anglo-text is seen as superimposed upon an erased Indigenous/source language. Relexification, "the forging of a new literary-aesthetic medium out of the elements of an alien, dominant lexicon," defines one part of this metaphor, according to Zabus ("Under" 269).

In her early fiction Emecheta uses simple diction and straightforward style of narration. This reflects both the lack of opportunity she had for a classical education, such as Achebe enjoyed, as well as her artistic choices and her linguistic background. The introduction of Pidgin dialogue in *Kehinde*, particularly within the part of the novel set in London, shows a comfort level which Emecheta has developed in her country of exile and a willingness to experiment with language. While writing *Kehinde*, she was able to return to Nigeria and research the dialogue for the passages set in Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> Emecheta is participating in transforming Pidgin itself into a tool for social critique, a recent development. For example, Ashcroft et al. suggest that Pidgin is used differently in postcolonial literature than in spoken discourse; it performs as "a serviceable bridge between speakers of different languages in everyday life" (76). However, in literature, "its role ... is both to install class difference and to signify its presence" (Ashcroft et al. 76). True to her pragmatic style of writing, Emecheta's protagonist, Kehinde, uses Pidgin in talking with her Hausa friend Moriammo as a serviceable way to talk in a less stilted manner. Both women have jobs in the bank requiring fluency in English but they speak different mother tongues. Their use of Pidgin serves a practical purpose but also unifies them in a sisterhood of otherness. It unites

them yet ironically sets them apart as “other” linguistically because they are in England using a form of the language “inherited from British occupation” of their homeland (Ashcroft et al. 76). But Emecheta is not using Pidgin as a class marker. In writing the dialogue between Duro and Kehinde. Emecheta also utilizes vocabulary from her second indigenous language, Yoruba, as well as using Pidgin. Duro and Kehinde both work as hotel maids and they speak standard English until they begin to discuss a letter Kehinde has received from her daughter Bimpe.<sup>7</sup> When Kehinde tells Duro that Bimpe wants to return to London, Duro answers: “So that surprises you? Sebi they can read? Even the children can see the writing on the wall” (123). It is interesting to note that in this particular passage of the novel the dialogue between the two women contain what Ashcroft et al. call “interlanguage” or untranslated words (66). “Sebi,” an exclamation in Yoruba vernacular used in a conversation between Kehinde and Duro in the hotel where they work, is glossed at the end of the novel. In the same passage, a Hausa word “yamuta” is used and glossed. Interlanguage “seems a successful way to foreground cultural distinctions” (Ashcroft et al. 66). However, the emphasis on “writing” as a message to the younger Nigerian generation that they have to abandon their homeland in order to survive is interesting when juxtaposed with interlanguage and it suggests the post- and neo-colonial complexity the characters in the novel are dealing with.

Reading for the emergence of such exciting “hybridity” and for “contesting worlds in ferment”<sup>8</sup> behind these stories may be accomplished more easily in the works of Emecheta than in Slipperjack’s writing. We must be careful not to conflate two literatures which emerge from such different contexts.

The application of the concept of the palimpsest to Native literature is given a new twist

by Gordon Brotherston in his epilogue to *The Fourth World*. After a comprehensive historical discussion of the rich diversity in language and script of the literatures of the Fourth World he suggests that this body of work be viewed as the “palimpsest of Anglo and Latin American literatures” (341). Brotherston offers an argument for the engagement of Western literatures with Native American texts from the Romantics onward, with Native texts playing a key part “in such twentieth-century movements as Expressionism and Surrealism” (341). Unfortunately a study of such impacts on the western canon has yet to be done. As Brotherston says, “critical appreciation of this whole process has been scant”<sup>9</sup> (341). Within the field of Native literary study Bakhtin’s dialogics are being applied.

Joanne Neff points out that many “postcolonial and Native works are strongly polyphonic in the sense that the authors find a voice or recount their experiences in relation to other voices” (83). She points out that in *Honour the Sun* the affirmative spiritual guidance of Owl’s mother “allows the daughter to embrace a more harmonious view of human existence,” one partaking of the sacred circle (83). The “recurrent voice of the mother ... evokes a continuity of spirit” (Neff 83). In *Silent Words* the voice of Ol’ Jim performs much the same function for Danny. The two novels of Slipperjack and the many novels of Emecheta offer examples of Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia.” The novel is seen by Bakhtin as the ideal genre for expressing multiple voicing. Bakhtin notes in “Discourse in the Novel”: “Every language in the novel is a point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives” (411). David Lodge says in simplifying Bakhtin’s views about language in the novel: “the language of the novel is not *a* language, but a medley of styles and voices” (129). Lodge considers that this heteroglossia produces in the novel a literary form “in which no ideological or

moral position is immune from challenge and contradiction” (129).

Edward Said, in an interview published in *Boundary 2*, suggests that the function of the intellectual reader of postcolonial literatures is “reconciliation of what is there with past history” (“Interview” 18). He adamantly asserts that “polemical and oppositional models of the past do not serve today” (“Interview” 21). Avoiding reductive approaches but reading in a “patient, meticulous detailed” way is his solution (“Interview” 22). Listening to and honouring the silences in the works of Slipperjack and Emecheta may then become possible.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion: The Margins are the Frame

This thesis discusses literary works by Ruby Slipperjack and Buchi Emecheta. Both of these writers return to their homelands and also create new homes within their works. To tell their stories, however, they must use a foreign imposed language, a language that imprisons and restricts their natural expression. Thus they are in many ways exiles seeking home and finding it only at times in their writing. Their works seem strangely satisfying and ultimately nourishing perhaps because exile is both postcolonial and postmodern condition for most, if not all, of their intended audiences.<sup>1</sup>

Wole Soyinka points to the functional aspects of art in traditional African cultures. His comments apply as well to traditional Native cultural works. "The mystical and the visionary are merely areas of reality like any other," Soyinka explains, and activism or the activist role in art are givens (65). There is in western literary tradition a suspicion of works with a social purpose or works with polemical or political goals. Works may incidentally contain a political message but may not be directed by it but only by aesthetics. Emecheta's works are avowedly purposeful. Indigenous traditions may present didactic or politically persuasive stories but there is an emphasis on the freedom of the listener/reader to translate them as he or she wishes or needs to. Slipperjack's discomfort with discussing her stories and her avoidance of lengthy explanations of them is consistent with this tradition.

In *Head Above Water* Emecheta's description of her "Big Mother" imparting the story of the young Emecheta's birth demonstrates the instilling of self-esteem by an elder to a child. Ruby Slipperjack's protagonist in *Honour the Sun*, Owl, receives spiritual guidance from her mother at

an early age which carries over into the next generation. Both writers show the devastation of self-esteem and culture by colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Slipperjack and Emecheta offer feminist critique from their own cultural perspectives. However, that critique differs from that of mainstream or western feminists. Both writers present the condition of women as contingent on or at least equally related to the absence of adequate father figures. For example, Emecheta's persona, Adah, in *Second-Class Citizen*, is left deprived of an opportunity of education when her father dies and she, her mother and brother are financially bereft. In Slipperjack's novels the death or misbehaviour of the father leads to the absence or inadequacy of maternal nurturance.

Similarly cross-cultural conflicts are viewed differently in the novels of both of these writers. Diverging from the pre-dominant European view of attributing problems to inter-racial, or political differences, Emecheta's novels point to class differences. In *Second-Class Citizen* she demonstrates that cultural differences diminish when poverty draws people together in the welfare "Ditch." Slipperjack shows families along the rail lines working within white culture yet maintaining their traditional value systems of helping one another and obtaining food from the land. In *Silent Words* the hermit who has not disrupted the land is respected by Ol' Jim and he expresses the wish that "there were more people like him" (149). Appropriate connections within the sacred circle of life diminish cross-cultural conflicts between Native and non-Native.

Olga Kenyon credits Buchi Emecheta with restoring to the novel its "freshness of storytelling, in danger of being underestimated, even excluded by some experimentalists" (*Writing Women* 131). If this is true of Emecheta in the context of British literature, it is also true of Slipperjack in the context of Canadian literature. Slipperjack's foremost goal is to tell a good

story and this is reflective of her traditions. This similarity between Emecheta and Slipperjack, this elevation of the ancient tradition of storytelling functions as a pointer to cultural oppression in their two societies and may serve a healing function as well.<sup>2</sup> The narrator in Slipperjack's first novel, *Honour the Sun*, is directed to "always listen to the silence" (184). This injunction may well apply to the reader of one culture reading the works of another. It may also assist the reader in following Said's suggestion of reading and enjoying literature as a counter model to the will of empire building as an aid for the reader in situating her/himself in a non-reductive space emptied of distracting "urgency of theory" ("Interview"18).

The young Canadian narrator in a short story by Cynthia Flood is told by her teacher in Canada that her "page is a picture, the margins frame [the] text" (25). At school in Britain the same narrator is told that such a format inclusive of margins is only used in the colonies and is wasteful of paper. Located in the margins, the writings of Ruby Slipperjack and Buchi Emecheta frame the dominant western canon in all of its linearity, rigid norms and exclusiveness, providing a rich contrast and a space to grow.

## *Epilogue*

*Reader, enter this part freely—it is outside of the margins; it is not framed. It won't frame you but it does cross the border to "I" so it does violate the marginalized, academic, disinterested "i." And it might contain a wail, many voices, unpackaged, untamed, undisciplined.*

*I place it here in a spirit more humble than it might appear because like Liza's petticoat in the song "I'se the Bye," I feel this thesis needs a border, tattered though it might seem, an emotive border at the bottom of it all or the ensemble is incomplete.*

*My education to date seems to have led a divided self. The sacredness and separateness of literature kept it apart from the world. The stories, poems, plays themselves did not do this, but the academic study of literature did. My lucky choice of marginalized writing for this thesis changed all of that and has enabled me to understand that ironically many fields of study (including literature) denied a whole part of my experience. Most pertinent to this (confession) is the uselessness of the "master's tools"<sup>1</sup>—for healing inequities and for reading and appreciating marginalized writers.*

*Quite properly many fears attend upon the non-marginalized person proposing to discuss literature written by persons from the margins. Fear accompanies the necessary caution required to try to respect a sensibility new to one's experience, the research needed to accept, and the wisdom to respect, what one cannot understand or what one cannot bear to know. Add to these cautions the impropriety of the academic, hegemonic conventions which desecrate emotional responses to learning and consider as radical responses based on one's experiences, and a paralyzing terror can result.*

*My interests seemed simple enough at the start of this thesis. I knew I wanted to explore*

*the writing of two women writers from different cultures. Almost immediately however the problem of naming occurred. Was this to be a comparative study? Comparison held unacceptable associations for me—implications of competition, literary transparency, judging and weighing. Susan Snaider Lanser, a comparatist and a feminist, points out that “[t]he post-war expansion of comparative literature to embrace virtually any study of literature beyond national boundaries has allowed a latitude of practice that may have forestalled a reconceptualization of the discipline” (284). She offers this as the explanation for the puzzling absence of feminist critique within literary practice and the continued use of the “master’s tools” in reading literature beyond the traditional canon. Interestingly, Lanser distinguishes “comparative inquiry” from the “inclusion of difference” in literary critical practice (283).*

*The more I read of the works of Slipperjack and Emecheta the more I wanted to celebrate, appreciate and understand their stories and the less I wanted to apply the master’s tools to their words. I found their own words about their writing to make sense as well as the words of their foremothers and fathers. However, as Lanser notes, convention dictates the reading of literary works in intertext (according to “universal literary laws”) and theory rather than in context (285). And context began to give me trouble. A lot of trouble.*

*Once I decided to look at exile in women writers, I chose Slipperjack and Emecheta because I had some experience with part of their contexts—their geographic places of origin—having lived four years in Nigeria and having spent my formative years in Northern Ontario. Reading Emecheta resulted in an awareness of just how unacquainted I was with the complexities of Nigeria despite so-called cultural sensitivity training, enduring friendships and ongoing connections with the country. Emecheta’s honest, no-holds-barred feminist critique*

*destroyed any last romantic notions I might have had about relationships between men and women and the sacredness of the extended family in Nigeria. At first this loss was manifested in my belief that Emecheta was an inferior writer with a less-than-polished sensibility. My experiences were pushed aside in order to maintain this posture for a long time until close examination of Emecheta's novels and autobiographical writings forced me to admit how closely her stories mirrored experiential "truth." Not a sophisticated or distancing way to analyze literature but a way to reluctantly discover how important a writer Emecheta is.*

*My biggest challenge was Ruby Slipperjack. I resisted beginning focused work on her until my supervisor suggested situating myself by writing about early influences from my acquaintance with some special Native people I was fortunate to know. At first I couldn't do this—memories were scarce but once started I wrote hundreds of pages—none of it appropriate for this thesis but all of it bearing on how I later read Slipperjack's work. In the process I realized the connection I have always denied between South African apartheid and the Canadian treatment of Native people. How as a Canadian, in everything from my history to my racist language, I am as Dennis Lee says, an Indian-swindler. I acknowledged (and remembered) that three of my family (including me) owe(d) our lives to different (unnamed) Anishnawbe women. I had just accepted this erasure of the Native people who had influenced the lives of our family. The result of this exercise left me frozen in my tracks for some time with incredulity, guilt and sadness.*

*Michael Thorpe, arguing for the internationalization of English-Canadian literature, points out that "Canada, most recently the Third World's best friend, has found itself thrust in the world's eye as a colonizing nation, suggesting uncomfortable parallels with South Africa"*

*I experienced this in a personal way. As in the case of Emecheta, I am in awe at the vastness of my ignorance about the culture of the "other." Though in the thesis I demonstrate the absence of Native literature in the Canadian academy and the canon, the women's literary community carries on a sustained debate between a number of Native and Euro-Canadian women writers such as Lee Maracle, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Marie AnnHarte Baker, Susie O'Brien, Barbara Godard, Jeanne Perreault and Julia Emberley. As a student, I have been able to join in this debate, so to speak, through reading these writers and this has made the process a little less isolating. It has also convinced me of how important First Nations cultural works are to all Canadians. Until we read what is being written and situate ourselves realistically as readers we are missing a large part of our literary heritage. Feeling around in the half-light of postmodern, neo-colonial irony trying to avoid the discomfort of guilt which the experience of First Nations literature produces just won't cut it for me anymore.<sup>2</sup>*

*In retrospect, the elusiveness of these works and my inability to pin them down to a page and locate them theoretically, is now understandable. None the less painful, however, because an exploration of these writers does not result in packaged satisfaction or the feeling of mastery which I have come to expect academically. An integral part of reading works by marginalized writers is discomfiture.*

*One thing I have learned for certain is that mainstream institutional (academic) discourse(s) cannot adequately address marginalized writings. Their diversity, richness and disobedience means that hegemonic, monocultural discourse will never be enough to contain these writers and I will always seek them out at the frontiers of my imagination.*

## NOTES

### Chapter One

1. The term “marginalized” has gained critical currency and includes, among others, women, ethnic minorities and the oppressed. However, marginalized is a relative term. For example, in a dialogue with Beth Cuthand, Maria Campbell emphasized that she does not feel marginalized any longer because she writes for a Native audience and therefore has a central place in this community (“Maria Campbell Talks” 264-65).
2. In this thesis, the word describing Emecheta’s ethnic group will be spelled either Igbo or Ibo. The spellings are interchangeable and will depend on the material quoted.
3. At the time of this writing (1997), *Kehinde* is Emecheta’s most recent novel.
4. Examples of minor characters reappearing in Emecheta’s novels can be found as well as examples of intertextual narratives similar to those found in Lawrence Durrell’s *The Alexandrian Quartet*. Intertextual themes will be discussed in chapter two. An example of the recurrence of minor characters is the Sierra Leonian teacher who marries the protagonist in *The Bride Price*, and re-appears as a minor character in *Second-Class Citizen*. The mention of Sierra Leone conjures up, particularly for readers from Lagos, thoughts of the Atlantic slave trade since immigrants to Lagos from Sierra Leone were descendants of returned slaves.
5. The name applied to Slipperjack’s particular ethnic group is referred to with a variety of spellings, variously as Ojibwa, Ojibway, Anishnawbe, and Anishnaube.
6. Freake relies on the work of George Lakoff for the historical background of metaphor.
7. One of the most famous is the persistence in the western literary imagination of what Northrop Frye called “The Great Code.”
8. Freake cites Lakoff as the source of his information about the new metaphor discussed by Lakoff in *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind*.
9. The two parts of classical rhetoric comparison are *similitudo* (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”)—the qualitative portion; and *comparatio* (“Thou are more lovely and more temperate”)—the quantitative portion (Melas 276).
10. The dialogical approaches used in this thesis rely upon Bakhtin’s inclusive methodologies including his emphasis on sociocultural, historical and ideological contexts; the questioning of monolithic thought and his concept of heteroglossia or multiple voicing. Irena Makaryk notes that “Bakhtin raises questions and offers hypotheses, but his answers remain open ...” (32). Barbara Godard identifies how “in the case of a conflict in cultural traditions, the confrontational encounter of languages becomes explicit. Ethnic writers [this may also apply to First Nations authors] experience the conflict of heteroglossia in a specific way as a deterrent to participation

in a national tradition” (“The Discourse of the Other” 157).

11. The first Igbo writer published in English was Olaudah Equino, who published his autobiography in 1789, which he wrote while living in England, as part of the slavery abolition movement.

12. For example, Charlotte Bruner notes in her preface to the 1993 *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing* that African women authors are “reaching an audience at home and abroad” (vii). Slowly now critical works are beginning to be published based on individual women authors such as Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, and recently Buchi Emecheta.

13. Ngugi wa Thiong'o continues to remind us that many African voices are not being heard. In *Moving the Centre*, written in 1993, he wishes that scholars would “come out more strongly and more solidly in aid of their colleagues in the jails of Kenya” (86). Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka are in exile from a country which chose to blatantly execute Ken Saro Wiwa for using his pen to protest the oppression of the Ogoni people.

14. It is worthy of note that recent anthologies edited by mainstream Canadian writers have included some traditional Native literature: for example, Margaret Atwood's *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* contains two poems by Pauline Johnson; and Michael Ondaatje's anthology, *From Ink Lake*, presents contemporary works by Daniel David Moses, John Kelly and Alice French representing different genres by different First Nations peoples.

The genre of autobiography/life writing, including oral traditions, is outside the scope of this thesis but great contributions have been made in these areas in Canada. See for example: Barbara Godard's “Talking About Ourselves: The Literary Productions of Native Women of Canada”; Robin McGrath's “Circumventing the Taboos: Inuit Women's Autobiographies,” and Julie Cruikshank's “Life Lived Like a Story.”

For the purposes of this discussion I have referred primarily to mainstream, contemporary Canadian critical theory. The words of Native scholars and writers are introduced to illustrate my contention that this literature has received somewhat minimal reception. However, I have noted in my epilogue the importance of the vibrant discussion and dialogue taking place currently within the feminist literary community in Canada.

15. McGrath and Petrone suggest that the 1969 Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy (the White Paper), which proposed the abolition of special rights for Native peoples, provided an impetus for creative expansion (315).

16. A number of anthologies containing short stories, poetry and critical writing have emerged: *Native Writers Canadian Writing*, ed. W.H. New; *All My Relations*, ed. Thomas King; *A Gathering of Spirit*, ed. Beth Brant; *First People, First Voices*, ed. Penny Petrone; *Writing the Circle*, ed. Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance; and *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, ed. Daniel Moses and Terry Goldie.

17. Baker has spoken extensively in the past on the subject of appropriation. Her style is polemical, direct, vernacular and often funny. For example, the essay from which this quotation was taken is called “Gotta Be On Top: Why The Missionary Position Fails to Excite Me.” In it she points to the financial losses incurred by the Native women’s community due to appropriation. She notes, “we are busy surviving. Who is representing us at the bank?” (299).

18. Throughout this thesis “intertextuality” is used to mean “the relationship between -esp literary texts” (*Concise Oxford Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> Edition*, 1990), and does not refer to Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality.

## Chapter Two

1. To try to briefly outline the “facts” of Emecheta’s biography brings one face to face with the impossibility of the task. Emecheta describes her novelistic subject matter in an autobiographical essay in *Kunapipi*: “I write about the world I know and the way I see it” (“Head Above Water” 115). These fictional representations easily become conflated with her autobiography and make for an interesting impact on critical discourse about her work.

See Brenda Berrian’s extensive “Bibliography” on Buchi Emecheta including all of her broadcast work and plays in Marie Umeh’s *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, 461-474.

2. Such a chronology as provided in Umeh’s *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta* simplifies and clarifies the more complex narrative provided by Emecheta herself in her autobiography *Head Above Water* (hereafter identified as *Head*); however, in order to refer to important milestones in Emecheta’s life it is necessary to refer to both.

3. In this early publication (*In the Ditch*) Emecheta uses names ironically. A poverty-ridden, quarrelling couple she describes are called Mr. and Mrs. King. Mr. King having lost the fight, “held his head in both hands, like the picture of the convict in *Great Expectations*” (57).

4. It is fascinating to note that Buchi Emecheta remembers the name of this nurse after forty years.

5. It is interesting to note that Chike, the person who frees Aku-nna from captivity, is himself enslaved due to the traditional Osu beliefs. Rebecca Boostrom analyzes this aspect as well as bride price customs in “Nigerian Legal Concepts in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*.”

6. This is not to discount the influence of Ifo (the oral narrative tradition) on Emecheta’s writing. Onitsha Market literature is a new phenomenon. It would be interesting to see a study of the effect of Ifo as it appears that Onitsha literature reproduces the moral codes of Ifo in modern themes.

7. Multiple voicing is termed as heteroglossia in Bakhtin’s work.

8. Sheila Mullett describes the self-knowledge that emerges in this setting: “certain insights of great significance to any moral agent, which can only be achieved through caring” (316). Mullett

continues: “in such processes thought and emotion are intricately integrated ... as a whole, to care is to be open to transformation” (322).

9. For example, she is transformed by a comment from Bill, a friend at the library, that her book is her brainchild. This reflects the centeredness of her culture of origin on the bearing of children.

10. The American edition from Braziller has gone through eight printings from 1979 to 1990.

11. Emecheta married at a young age mainly because in her traditional family she could not remain in school as a single woman. The fight with her daughter about school fees focused her attention on her lot—that of being alone, financially responsible for five children with their estranged father in total denial of any responsibilities towards his children.

12. All other quotes from *The Joys of Motherhood* are from the 1990 Braziller edition.

13. Previous to this it was difficult for Emecheta to distribute her books in Nigeria. However, Heinemann has reissued her backlist along with *Kehinde* under their *African Writers Series* and this may make her books more available everywhere.

14. Homogenized Third World Women are discussed by Gunew and Spivak in “Questions of Multiculturalism” in *Women’s Writing in Exile*, 413.

15. Julie Cairnie discusses the concept that autobiography is thought of as being a western genre and “implicated in imperialism” (94). Lynette Hunter suggests that critical embarrassment often accompanies the reading of “bios” writing. She guides the reader to be aware of this embarrassment: “Embarrassment can be a help to this recognition because it locates points of difference” (146).

### Chapter Three

1. The following anthologies contain different extracts: *Kitchentalk: Contemporary Women’s Prose and Poetry*; *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*; *Native Voices*; and *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*.

2. The two names for Slipperjack’s ethnic group within First Nations have numerous spellings. In this thesis I use various ones partly to accommodate particular spellings in quotations. Basil Johnston, an Ojibway scholar, educator and folklorist, writes in the glossary of *The Manitous*: “Anishinaubae (Anishinaubaek or Anishinaubaewuk)[:] The good being or beings” (239). American Native scholar Gerald Vizenor uses a different spelling in *Touchwood*; he explains: “The Anishinaabe [the plural is Anishinaabeg] are known to most of the world as the Ojibway and Chippewa ...” (v).

3. Dan Rice, letter to the author, 2 May 1994. Rice is a MA student and associate of Ruby Slipperjack at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario.

4. Ruby Slipperjack, letter to the author, 4 May 1994.
5. Permission to reproduce the cover art for inclusion in this thesis was denied by the publisher.
6. Paula Gunn Allen, "Introduction," *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
7. Ruby Slipperjack, letter to the author, 4 May 1994.
8. A combined review of *Silent Words* and Lee Maracle's *Sundogs* in *Canadian Forum*.
9. Permission to reproduce the cover art for inclusion in this thesis was denied by the publisher.
10. See Edward Hedican "On the Rail-Line in Northern Ontario: Non Reserve Housing and Community Change" for further analysis of the effects of rail-lines on Slipperjack's area.
11. Basil Johnston explains the importance of tobacco: "only the pipe ceremony possessed a universal and more profound meaning than other rituals ... The pipe represented all relationships ..." (*Ojibway Heritage* 134). The pipe ceremony preceded all other ceremonies although it could also be held alone.
12. George Lakoff calls this "experientialist" view of human reason "magnificent." Lakoff writes that "the mind is more than a mere mirror of nature or a processor of symbols, ... it is not incidental to the mind that we have bodies, and that capacity for understanding and meaningful thought goes beyond what any machine can do" (*Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* xvii).

#### **Chapter Four**

1. The critical and fictional works of Julia Kristeva, Barbara Godard and Marlene Nourbese Philip among others demonstrate a development of feminist language theory.
2. The debate about African writing continues in much the same vein with polarized views as evidenced by Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah's essay "African Literatures and Postcolonialism: Projections into the Twenty-First Century" in *Canadian Review of Contemporary Literature* (1995). Na'Allah stresses the need for negotiation and says, "We need Western language(s) with sound skills in western maneuvering" (575).
3. Ironically, the architect of this residential school system was the well-known poet, Duncan Campbell Scott, when he was Minister of Indian Affairs; see Stan Dragland's *Floating Voice*.
4. Owls also have a close association with shamanism. Holger Kalweit in *Shamans, Healers, and Medicine Men* describes several eye witness accounts of the Ojibwa shaking tent healing ceremony: "When a helping spirit approaches, a whistling sound like the wind or an owl hoot is heard" (158-59).

5. Ruby Slipperjack, letter to author, 4 May 1994.
6. An example of her research can be seen in the “Acknowledgements” of *Kehinde*. Emecheta thanks the Odozi Ododo Evangelical Church in her home town of Ibuza for allowing her to observe their “use of voices.”
7. Bimpe is, incidentally, a Yoruba name as is the title of the novel itself.
8. Zabus suggests such possible readings in “Under the Palimpsest and Beyond: The World, the Reader, and the Text in the Nigerian Novel in English.”
9. Though specific intertextual references cannot be tracked in Slipperjack’s writing, as Georges Sioui unequivocally says, Native traditional spirituality and view of the world provide archaic referents.

### **Chapter Five**

1. This said, Angela Ingram’s caution regarding the risk of privileging the exiled subject so that “she who was previously exiled and silenced” (2) is now centred must be remembered.
2. Penny Petrone, in *First People, First Voices*, points out the importance of storytelling for healing within Native tradition.

### **Epilogue**

1. This expression comes from Audre Lorde’s essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider*.
2. Hartmut Lutz discusses the exclusion of historical context, “especially the history of Native/Non-Native relations” and the resultant exploitative appropriation in Canadian Literature (“Cultural Appropriation” 168).

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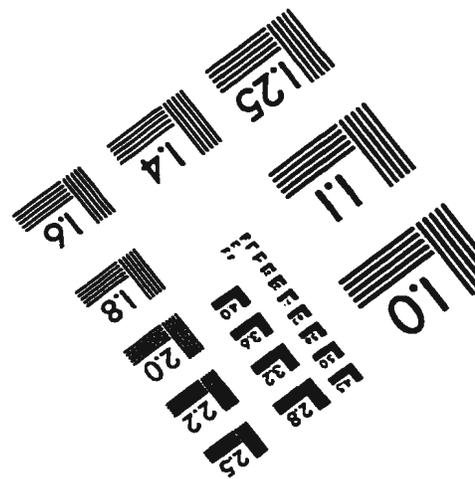
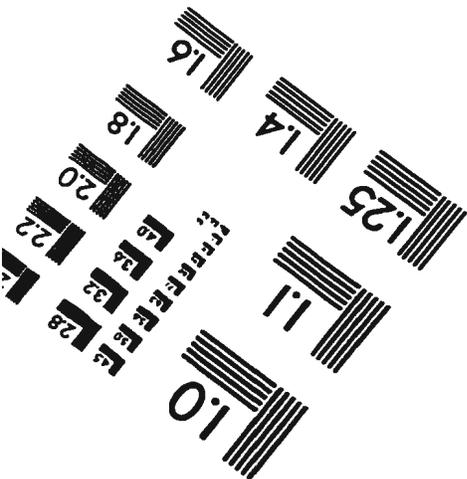
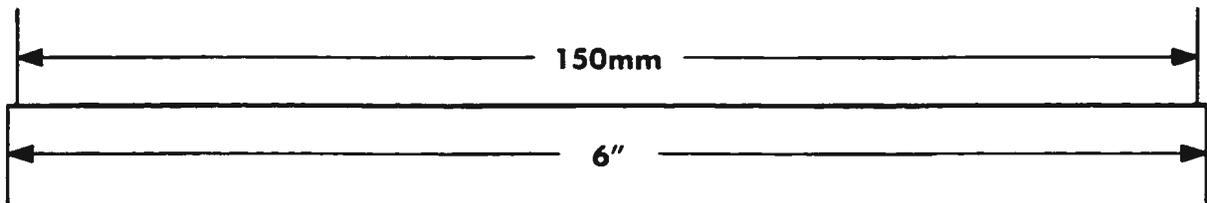
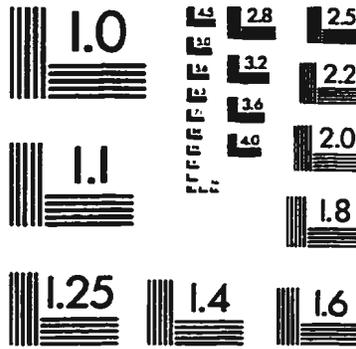
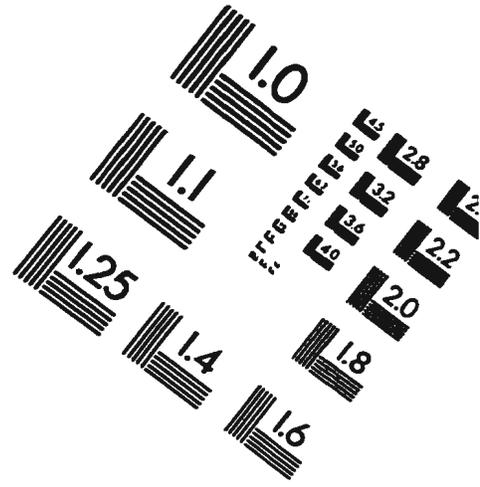
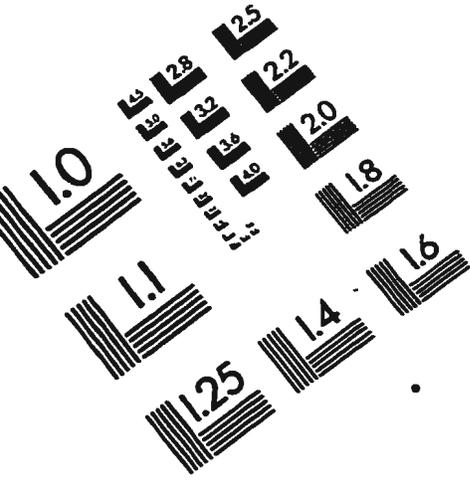
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