

Suspense Strategies in Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water*

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Abstract

This paper explores two strategies employed by Buchi Emecheta to create suspense in her autobiography *Head Above Water*. The two strategies are the use of chapter headings and provision of backgrounds to episodes. It has been ascertained from this study that contrary to some assertions by some scholars about the structure of female autobiography, Emecheta's self-account is coherently organised. This organisation is exploited by the author to create expectation in her readers about what transpires in her account.

Keywords: female autobiography, suspense, Buchi Emecheta, African autobiography

Introduction

Almost every autobiographer has as his or her focus the mission of portraying his or her life as the ideal one. In fact, without this aim, the need for autobiography will be obviated as writers of autobiography try to paint pictures of their lives whether it was progressive or otherwise. According to White and Epston (1990), "persons give meaning to their lives and relationships by storying their experience" (p. 13). Hence the necessity for autobiography by those who deem their experiences worthy of portrayal. The ideal life, according to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, is one that corresponds to the ideal story; each act is coherently related to all other with nothing to spare (cited in Nehamas, 1985). In creating this coherence, some authors try to get their readers involved by gluing them to the account through the use of suspense. This is a controlled way on creating internal tensions in a narrative (Yanal, 1996). Suspense is the creation of a sense of anticipation on the part of the reader concerning what will ensue in a piece of narrative. This paper explores the strategies employed by Buchi Emecheta to create suspense in her autobiography *Head Above Water*. The two main techniques to be looked at are chapter headings and backgrounding of episodes or withholding of revelation.

The strategies adopted by Buchi Emecheta in her autobiography to create suspense are going to be delved into in terms of the following questions:

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- a. How does Emecheta use chapter headings to create suspense?
- b. How does Emecheta use backgrounding of episodes to create suspense?

However, before this is proceeded on, a little background on Buchi Emecheta will be provided. The detail of this can be found in her autobiography *Head Above Water* and other sources.

Background of Buchi Emecheta

Born in Lagos in 1944, Buchi Emecheta was the second of two children of Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta and Jeremy Nwabudike Emecheta. Through a scholarship, Buchi Emecheta gained an admission into the Methodist Girls' High School at age 10. At 17, Emecheta married and gave birth to her first daughter called Chiedu Onwordi. Sometime after this, she got a job at the American Embassy in Lagos and through this she was able to save enough to cover her expenses to London in 1962. Upon her arrival in London, she landed a job at the North Finchley Library to the envy of her landlord and her neighbours since most Nigerians at that time rather worked in factories (p. 28). With the sinecure nature of the library job, Emecheta's interest in writing began to surface. However her husband, who burned her first manuscript entitled *The Bride Price*, cut this short. This and other abrasive happenings led to the separation of the Emecheta from her husband.

After the divorce, Emecheta took up other jobs and also initially enrolled part-time for a bachelor's degree in Sociology in London University in 1969. She also started working on her first novel, *In The Ditch*, which was earlier published serially in a newspaper called the *New Statesman* in 1972. Eventually, *In the Ditch* was published in a volume by Barry and Jenkins. Emecheta followed this work with *The Second Class Citizen*, the *Bride Price* and *The Slave Girl*. Other publications to Emecheta's credit include *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Destination Biafra*, *Naira Power*, *Double Yoke* and *Gwendolen*. Emecheta also authored the play *A Kind of Marriage* produced on BBC television in 1975.

Emecheta's writing style has traces of her Igbo background permeating it as, despite her sojourn in England, her literary compass points at Nigeria. Igboanusi (2001) points out that this characteristic pervades the works of writers of Igbo origin like Chenua Achebe and Elechi Amadi as such authors successfully nativize the English language in their novels.

From the foregoing account on Buchi Emecheta, it can be surmised that her immerse experience in writing works of fictional narratives will influence the account in her autobiography. Some elements of fictional narratives can be derived from her account and

these include her use of suspense. The task of this paper is to illuminate two strategies employed by Emecheta to arouse suspense in her readers.

Women's Autobiography

Since the 1980s, there is an interest in women's autobiographical practices as an articulation of women's life experience and a source for articulating feminist theory. Heilbrun (1988) posits that only in the last third of the twentieth century have women broken through a realization of the narratives that have been controlling their lives. Heilbrun goes on to indicate that before this time, women's autobiography existed in the shadows of those of their men counterparts.

Heilbrun (1988) states that there are four ways to write a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without recognizing or naming the process (p. 12). However, to Barbara Johnson, the problem for the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for the enterprise, and, on the other hand, to describe a difficulty in conforming with the female ideal which is largely a masculine one (Barbara Johnson cited in Smith & Watson, 1998).

Women's autobiography was regarded by academicians and popular historians as "at best a mine of biographical information and salty citations and deemed it too windy and unreliable—since life stories "stretch" the truth—to be worthy of critical investigation (Smith & Watson, 1998: p. 4/5). Nevertheless, the texts and theory of women's autobiography have been pivotal for revising our concepts of women's life issues (p. 5). Autobiographies like Emecheta's *Head Above Water* has become a mouthpiece of the women who are victims of patriarchy and male chauvinism. Similarly, Maya Angelou's series of six autobiographical volumes which she debuted with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) explores a kaleidoscope of issues relating to the African-American female. Angelou's self-narratives are sometimes classified as autobiographical fictions because of her use of sanitised dialogues, coherent themes and others (Lupton, 1998).

Buchi Emecheta has storied her life in two of the ways that Heilbrun (1988) mentions above. First, she has composed works of fiction which were generally motivated by her life experiences in England. For instance, in *In the Ditch*, a young Nigerian woman, Adah, struggles hard to overcome her fate of being financially dependent on the British institutions

and becomes a liberated woman through her hard work and education (Oriaku, 2007). Also, Emecheta continues her life saga in *Second-Class Citizen* in which she elaborates on the difficulties of the migrants, positioned within two cultures, like Emecheta's protagonist Adah Obi herself. The only way to Adah's liberation is her industrious endeavour to become a famous writer (Oriaku, 2007). The second way Emecheta writes about her life is by giving a factual account in the form of an autobiography; thus, *Head Above Water*. On these ways that females present their live stories, Oriaku (2007) states that the writer's experiences form a resource base for both the autobiographer and the novelist. The account in Emecheta's autobiography runs parallel with some of her works of fiction like *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen* which Emecheta herself describes as "autobiographical" (p. 104).

***Head Above Water* as a Female Autobiography**

According to Oriaku (2007), Emecheta's goal in her autobiographical writings is to highlight her unique success. The rest of the story shows how the failure of her marriage landed her and her children "in the ditch" in a foreign land and how she gradually overcame the handicap of being a "second-class citizen" both as a black in a white-dominated England and as a woman in a male-dominated world. *Head Above Water*, as a female autobiography, has its own distinctive structure and its form is at variance with the propensity for disorganisation that Gergen (1994) states about the female autobiography. Emecheta exploits the organised form of her autobiography and her knack for storytelling to create suspense in the various episodes she relates to her readers.

Conceptual Framework on Suspense

Suspense is an important factor to the enjoyment of a narrative by its readers (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982). According to Cheong and Young (2008), suspense is the feeling of excitement or the anxiety experienced when anticipating the uncertainty of a significant event. A typical characteristic of suspense is the sense of uncertainty and anxiety that audience or readers feel about the way events in a narrative unfold. Vorderer *et al* (1996) also posit that a key component of the emotion of suspense is a cognitive state of uncertainty.

Yanal (1996) states that to raise suspense, a narrative not only withholds information, it implies several possible alternative outcomes, only one which can be eventually realised at points in the narrative will be uncertain to the audience. Yanal (1996) adds that this uncertainty as to the narrative's outcome would seem to be a necessary condition for

suspense, for it seems a person cannot be in suspense regarding an outcome he already knows. However, some authors have tried to explain the "paradox of suspense" which is a narrative tension that remains effective even when uncertainty is neutralized, because repeat audiences know exactly how the story resolves (e.g. Gerrig, 1989; Walton, 1990 and Brewer, 1996). Some factors that account for this phenomenon include forgetfulness of details (Brewer, 1996), immersion into the world of the narrative (Walton, 1990) and, in the case of fictional narrative, the disbelief by readers of the exact repetition of events (Gerrig, 1986) as this does not occur in real life.

Vordera *et al* (1996) have outlined some key theories that account for the creation of suspense in the mind of readers. These are reader involvement, identification theories and sympathy theories. According to the authors, when people read about a fictional world they can engage in a willing suspension of disbelief (as indicated by Coleridge, 1975) and become absorbed in the events in the fictional world. With the identification theories, the reader identifies with characters or personalities they read about and thereby come to feel the emotions that are being felt by the fictional character. In this case, the reader may believe that what is happening to a character may or can be happening to him or her. The sympathy theory which can be said to be some form of dramatic irony is postulated by Zillmann (1991c). According to this theory, the reader may be aware of what awaits a character in a narrative and therefore feel apprehensive towards what is about to happen but the character will unknowingly remain calm. In this regard, the calmness of the character rouses the reader's suspense.

In connecting these theories with what transpires in Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water*, it is apparent that hers is a real world and not a fictional one. Because of this, the reader is more likely to be sympathetic, get involved in the account and identify with the narrator than he or she would with a fictional character. Also, although the event in Emecheta's autobiography is a past one, the fact that one is uncertain about what transpires in the various episodes she relates puts one on edge. This accounts for the sympathy theory of suspense that Zillmann (1991c) and others postulate.

Methodology

The chapter headings selected for this work were purposively sampled among 33 others. This was based on their suspenseful nature and the author's provision of backgrounds to the various episodes of her life she narrates in those chapters.

Discussion

In this section two strategies for suspense employed by Buchi Emecheta in her autobiography are going to be elaborated and their implications will be discussed. These two strategies are the use of chapter headings and creation of backgrounds to episodes. These two were used hand in hand by Emecheta to accomplish suspense in her autobiography as one supported the other.

Chapter Heading

Emecheta's *Head Above Water* has 33 chapters and each of these has a heading. These captions are mainly noun phrases that provide hints to readers about what will emerge in the particular chapters of the book. The fact that the headings give readers hints about what take place in their chapters arouses reader suspense in the account. The subtitles also function as attention getters since a selective reader may read or skip a chapter depending on its title. It should be noted that many autobiography writers exploit this strategy in their writings. A very recent example of this by an African is in Kabral Blay-Amhire's *Fighting for Freedom—The Autobiography of an African Journalist* (2007). Emecheta has therefore captioned her chapters such that her readers will be put into anticipatory mood prior to their reading of the chapter. A selected number of these chapter subtitles are going to be discussed in this section.

a. The Miracle

This is the caption of the second chapter of Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water*. The word 'miracle' is likely to arouse the interest of the average reader because of the notion attached to miracles, which are possibly extraordinary. The author first of all uses this title to grab the attention of the reader towards the chapter. The effectiveness of this approach is prominent when a given reader reads the autobiography selectively in terms of chapters. Secondly, and most importantly, the title makes the reader curious concerning the miracle in question and therefore creates suspense.

b. What They Told Me

Following the 'The Miracle' chapter, the next chapter of *Head Above Water* is titled 'What They Told Me' which is a relative clause invested with a nominal function. This title carries some sense of intimacy with the reader as it suggests that the author is going to reveal something personal or even a secret. The grammatical structure of this subtitle contains an interrogative element in the form of "What" and everybody may want to find answers to such

basic questions. Because of this, the average reader of Emecheta's autobiography is likely to be made curious by the chapter title and he or she will be put into suspense concerning what Emecheta was told.

c. Culture Shock

The seventh chapter of Emecheta's autobiography has the title above. After reading the previous chapter that is aptly entitled 'The Holiest of Holies', which accounts for Emecheta's preparation and journey to England, one would find it difficult to drop the book when one sees the subtitle 'Culture Shock' in the next chapter. This is because one would be made anxious to ascertain what occasioned this twist as Emecheta earlier described the UK as the 'The Holiest of Holies'. The question one would ask will be about what led to the culture shock. The word 'shock' evokes the sympathy of the reader and this is supported by the sympathy theories of suspense propounded by Zillmann (1991c) and others. Buchi Emecheta also uses a similar title for the fourth chapter of her bestselling *The Joys of Motherhood* which is 'First Shocks of Motherhood' (p. 40). Emecheta therefore uses the expression "culture shock" to engage her readers and also to put them in a state of anticipation.

d. The Grant

As the reader gets engrossed or involved in the account in Emecheta's autobiography, he or she begins to follow her progress with keen interest. In view of Emecheta's meagre resources as a sociology student, the grant from the County Hall was going to be very instrumental in her upkeep. Because of this, the reader expects that she gets the grant to cushion herself financially and this makes the reader anxious to ascertain how she got the grant as it was good news. 'The Grant' being the subtitle of the 11th chapter of the work adequately puts the reader in suspense thereby compelling the reader to read on.

e. That First Novel

Head Above Water being an autobiography about a novelist, the subtitle above can put the average reader in suspense. One would want to find out how Emecheta came up with her first work. It would be a source of motivation for young readers, especially those who aspire to write. By virtue of the demonstrative pronoun 'that', the construction 'That First Novel' gives a hint to the reader that Emecheta went through some challenges in writing the novel. In everyday language 'that' is used when one is making reference to something troublesome or problematic as in "That man/woman??", "That school??", etc. *Head Above Water's* reader

would therefore be put into suspense to find out the kind of challenges the author went through to publish her first novel.

f. Job-Hunting

Another exciting episode Emecheta shares in her autobiography is when she attempted to get employment. This was after she had obtained her degree in sociology and published her first novel *In the Ditch*. In everyday life, job hunting is always a difficult moment and any reader who may be absorbed in Emecheta's self-account is likely to be put in suspense to discover what Emecheta went through to get a job after her graduation. "Job-Hunting" as the heading of chapter 18 is therefore a device employed by the author to put the reader in suspense. Accompanying this subtitle are its subsequent counterparts "The Interview" (chapter 19) and "The Wait" (chapter 20). These are all suspenseful as they put readers on edge. With these headings Emecheta conveys the tension and excitement at those moments with her reader and, by so doing, the reader finds it difficult to disengage from the unfolding accounts.

g. The Move

One dominant theme in Emecheta's autobiography is the theme of progress. In spite of the occasional let downs, Emecheta's life story is characterised by upward social mobility. This is in terms of education, employment and accommodation. The issue of housing is quite prominent in Emecheta's account because of its impact on her self-image and this warranted her constant reference to accommodation, landlords and other issues pertaining to housing. *Juju Landlord* was probably motivated by her experiences with Mr Olufunwa, her Nigerian landlord. Emecheta considered living in rented flats and council houses like 'The Pussy Cat Mansions' as living "in the ditch" and so it was rather exciting when she decided to relocate to her own house. The chapter title 'The Move' is suspenseful in itself as the reader expects some excitement on the part of the narrator. A glimpse of this joy was revealed in chapter 29 when the Emecheta and her family attempted to move to their own house:

"So we were going to move into our new house before Christmas. We were jubilant! ... People started to respect me" (188).

This was, however, short-lived as the owner of the house decided not to sell it anymore and Emecheta states "This incident made me deeply unhappy..." (193). 'The Move' is therefore a headline announcement to the reader that this time Emecheta and her children were really moving into their own house making it fill the reader with some anticipation about how Emecheta and her family finally moved.

Backgrounding/Withholding of Information

Another strategy that Emecheta employs to create suspense in *Head Above Water* is by providing backgrounds to episodes or withholding her revelations. This agrees with what Yanal (1996) states about authors withholding information to create suspense. This strategy congeals with the chapter heading to create suspense because whereas the chapter heading arouses the interest of the reader and hints him or her about what is about to transpire in the episode, the background information to that episode delays the revelation that the reader anticipates. This puts the reader on tenterhooks as the more the author delays in recounting the episode the more the reader grows curious. Also, in the backgrounding, Emecheta sometimes digresses from what she states in the heading thereby making the reader yearn for the information the author gives clues to in the chapter heading. Emecheta's use of backgrounding as suspense device will be explored in terms of the chapter headings discussed above to show how they congeal to create suspense in the reader.

a. The Miracle

After putting the reader in suspense with the chapter heading 'The Miracle', Emecheta delays in revealing the miracle she wants to relate to her readers and rather gives some information about her mother Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta Emecheta (p. 3). She describes whom her mother was, her relationship with her mother and reveals the claim among her folks that her mother might have cursed her (Buchi) before she died. These are stunning revelations but the reader will still be left in suspense about the miracle the author gives a hint about in the chapter's title. Emecheta, at the end of the chapter, mentions what she reckons to be the miracle after this lengthy background information. She states:

As for my survival for the past twenty years in England, from when I was a little over twenty, dragging four cold and dripping babies with me and pregnant with a fifth one—*that is a miracle* (p. 5).

The delayed revelation of the 'miracle' makes it appear to be an appendage or an afterthought of the entire chapter but when one connects Emecheta's success as a single mother in England to her mother's experience, which was not better, it is suitable to consider her survival in England as a miracle.

b. What They Told Me

The suspense in this chapter can be seen in the extensive background Emecheta provides before unveiling what it was that they told her. With this, the author delays her revelation to the reader and rather provides some information on her father and her auntie.

Here, Emecheta reveals what appears to be the source of the suspenseful nature of her self-narrative. She seems to have imbibed the ability to put her readers into suspense from her paternal auntie, Nwakwaluzo Ogbueyin, who inspired Emecheta to be a storyteller. Emecheta's auntie used to put her listeners into a state of anticipation prior to her narrations and of this Emecheta states "she had succeeded in rousing our curiosity and expectancy and she knew it. She closed her eyes and slowly drifted into one of her storytelling trances" (p. 7). In addition, Emecheta puts her readers into a little suspense when narrating the episode when she turns yellow because she was born premature. This actually constitutes the main issue of the chapter as Emecheta attempts to intimate the circumstance surrounding her birth to the reader of *Head Above Water* as 'What They Told Me'.

c. The Grant

In this chapter, Emecheta raises the anticipation of her readers by providing some sort of background to her receiving a grant for studies in the UK. In doing this, she first shares with her reader the struggles she was going through with her sociology programme. Secondly, Emecheta reveals how a friend of hers, Meriel, disclosed the availability of an opportunity for a student grant from her local government. After providing this background in pages 50 and 51, Emecheta includes, although with some digressions, further details about how she finally obtained the grant. All these were attempts by the author to put her readers into a state of expectancy and hence putting them in suspense.

d. That First Novel

Raising the curiosity of her readers with the heading above, Emecheta takes her reader back into the issues raging in her mind. First, she is unsure of what to do with her sociology degree. Emecheta states, "The question I kept asking myself was, what could I do as a sociologist?" (57) Secondly, she debates whether it was worthwhile to reveal so much of herself in her novels, as they were autobiographical in nature. She then goes on to share what motivated her to adopt her documentary style of writing; that is, by reading Nell Dunn's *Poor Crow* and Monica Dickens' *One Pair of Hands* which were about 'social reality' (p. 58). Emecheta then provides detailed information surrounding her publication of the first novel. All these put the reader in some kind of suspense as he or she will be uncertain about how Emecheta publishes her first novel. It should be mentioned here that although one anticipates Emecheta's successful publication of her first novel, one's ignorance about the details leading to the publication of the novel puts one in suspense (Brewer, 1996).

e. Job-Hunting

The chapter 18 of Emecheta's autobiography, with the title above, is suspenseful and Emecheta heightens this with a background to her job-hunting experience. With this, the author situates the difficulty in obtaining a job in England in the 1970s into the proclamations of one Enoch Powell. According to Emecheta, Enoch Powell incited xenophobic sentiments against people of African origin and this lingered as of the time she was looking for a job. Emecheta thus states:

By the time I had left college to look for work, the Powellite vision was no longer so hot, but one could feel the effect of the heat,... (p.110)

This background would make the average reader impatient to find out about how Emecheta finally obtained a job, making the background a device of suspense. Also, Emecheta gives a vivid account of her journey for her first job interview and this account transcends the current chapter to four equally suspenseful subsequent chapters aptly headed as "The Interview" (chapter 19), "The Wait" (chapter 20), "A Peep into The Seventies" (chapter 21) and "Job Acceptance" (chapter 22). The suspense that Emecheta creates in chapter 18 is sustained up to chapter 22 when Emecheta finally makes it definite that she accepted to take up the herculean task offered at The Seventies.

f. The Move

Emecheta begins chapter 31 which has the caption above by dovetailing the previous chapter (The TV Plays) into it. Whereas this serves as a perfect transitional technique, it delays the author's revelation of the subject matter of the present chapter. This can make the reader yearn for information on how Emecheta finally moved into her own house in London as she constantly makes references to it and even gives hints about it earlier in her autobiography.

Implications

Two main strategies have been identified as devices of suspense in Buchi Emecheta's autobiography *Head Above Water*. These were the use of chapter headings or titles and creation of backgrounds to episodes. These two techniques work hand in hand as one whets the appetite of the reader or creates an expectation in the reader whilst the other heightens this expectation by delaying in revealing the information. These compel the reader to read on in anticipation. However, Emecheta's use of suspense in her self-narrative has the following implications.

First, her autobiography has been storied and weaved together with a cause and effect plot structure. In this regard, almost every episode is either the cause or the effect of another

episode and Emecheta exploits this to create predictions that bring about suspense. Secondly, the use of suspense is smacked of fictional writing which Emecheta is highly acclaimed for. In *Head Above Water* one can sense the influence of Emecheta's novel writing acumen in her employment of chapter headings as devices of suspense and this is characteristic of most of her novels a typical example of which is found in her classic *The Joys of Motherhood*. Thirdly, Emecheta wants her readers to have the same interest in her life story as they would her novels. Therefore, her use of suspenseful chapter headings is to bait the reader to read the chapter and the background complements this by contextualising the episode in the chapter all the while putting the reader on tenterhooks.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the strategies utilised by Buchi Emecheta to create suspense in her autobiography *Head Above Water*. The strategies identified were chapter headings and backgrounding of episodes. In all, seven chapters were purposively sampled out of the thirty three chapters in Emecheta's autobiography. The chapter headings were examined in terms of their meaning and how they created expectations in the readers. Then the backgrounds to the chapter episodes which began almost every chapter in the autobiography were also discussed.

This paper has unveiled that contrary to Gergen's (1994) assertion that women's autobiographies are more likely to be structured around multiple endpoints and to include materials unrelated to any particular endpoint, a reading of Emecheta's autobiography shows that it forms a coherent whole. In essence, Emecheta is able to use chapter headings to create precognition in the mind of the reader and is able to exploit this to pull the reader along her narrative path in the form of suspense.

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