



Echoes of Marine Life in Literature with special reference to Buchi Emecheta

K. Shoba^{1,*}, Dr. M. Subha¹, Dr. Jibin Francis¹, Dr. Rachel Sing-Ee Tan²

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 Mar 2025;
in revised from 15 Apr 2025;
accepted 05 May 2025.

Keywords:

Maritime Trade, Buchi Emecheta,
Survival, Exploitation, Dimension.

ABSTRACT

Life does not exist without water. Human life starts and ends with water. Travels along with the humankind in their life journey. In literature it is signified as a source of rebirth and even death as reflected by many poets, novelists and playwrights in their works. Journey occurs across the globe and in literature it starts from ancient and present days. Our eminent Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta recognized for her literary works which as theses of identity, resilience, struggles and adversity. Buchi Emecheta's narrative style reflects the inner voices of a woman who is in the patriarchal society. Emecheta's protagonist connects their life journey through waterways, where they have a thought of freedom from male dominated society, better education and want to uplift their life style through empowerment. This paper tells how Buchi Emecheta's narratives express the connection between marine life and woman's search for identity, struggle of personal adversity and colonial impacts in their own lives.

© SEECMAR | All rights reserved

1. Introduction.

“The fringed curtains of thine eye advance and say what thou seest yond”

- William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611).

The above line is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) which is asking Miranda to open her eyes and tell what she actually see there in the sea. The play opens with a tempest where sea serves as a symbol of adventure, transformation, danger, etc. In works like William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) & Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) shows the existential voyage experience, spaces for testing human arenas, exploring identity and the experience of the tragic elements. From centuries ago the voice of male was dominant on women in every external boundary of any surface or area. Women have become the passive witnesses to masculine heroism. Regarding

this seeks to change the way of doing or thinking about something which is imbalance of the society in an alternate or different way. Women centre's the relationship among maritime world. History shows how the sea serves to shape, restrict and liberate female identities across literature. From viewing works of early modern period to contemporary writings the study to what extent women writers / authors and their characters/ protagonists navigated the invisible forces of maritime life to create a new image of ocean not merely as a background for male takes control of it but as a vision of female as the ability to act on one's will, destruction and a significant change.

The historical facts that influenced the literary depiction of women and the sea in order to comprehend them. The explorers, pirates and sailors romanticized the maritime history where women's contribution was excluded. Till early modern periods in Europe, communal norms restricted women from seafaring professions, associating the ocean with moral and physical danger. In Pre-European countries women were portrayed as wives of sailors, prostitutes in port cities or uncommon cross dressing explorers like Mary Read and Anne Bonny were considered as outliers or abnormal persons and their tales were either a mythologized or suppressed. Women were bound under a symbolic roles in literature. The representation of the 'un-

¹Department of English, AMET University, Chennai.

²Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts, INTI International University, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: Dr. Jibin Francis. E-mail Address: drjibinfrancis@gmail.com.

ruly' sea itself and a force to be subdued siren luring men to destruction.

During 17th and 18th century women experienced the maritime world shown through diaries, letters and ballads which shows the absences of husband and sons and also labourer in coastal economics. In the true story of Hannah Snell, she disguised herself as a man to serve in the Royal Navy in the fictional world *The Female Soldier* (1750). Another writer Daniel Defoe wrote *Moll Flanders* (1722), which was noted for the ideas of female empowerment that rests on the notion of woman as agents of their own wealth. These type of works though often wrote by men, where the use of motions as a means of expression of the unpleasant relationship between womanhood and survival in maritime. She was unable to accomplish decent living through her entire search for their better state. 19th century paved a way for women writers to kick start their writings connected to maritime themes, demanding gendered fluid of land/sea, domestic/wild, passivity/ adventure. In *Persuasion* (1817), a social realism novel written by Jane Austen, Mrs. Croft's travels along with her husband in the sea voyages seemed to be impossible during that time which shows the conventions of feminine fineness.

Similarly in Charlotte Bronte's work *Villette* (1853) the protagonist Lucy Snowe moves from her native England to the continental city of Villette which is a fictional city. There M. Paul was dead due to shipwreck which Lucy describes as 'destroying angel of tempest.' This description follows as a metaphor expresses her view on M. Paul and shows her peace of mind. As well our Eminent Nigerian author Buchi Emecheta's work narrates about the themes of migration, displacement, identity crises and marginalization. Through Emecheta's work it is possible to connect woman's journey and their experience that came through maritime experience and their creation of themselves as an empowered women, fulfilling their dreams and believing of their future according to their choice. Buchi Emecheta's novels sketches their readers to know all the minute details putting together in a complicated way of journey alongside of her characters. By the way of Emecheta's narration, her characters escalates sea to a higher place as a potent symbol of both privation/ hardship and trust to happen/ hope where established as a main element in Emecheta's literature.

2. Dimensions of the Sea.

John Peck's definition of the sea narrative would mark a very useful start point as, three elements compete for attention in sea stories: there is the individual sailor, who more often than not will display distinctively masculine qualities; the sea and the other shore as places of danger, where challenges have to be met; and thirdly, the social, economic and political dimension, that the ship is a product of technology, that it has been built for a purpose, and that there is a practical aspect to every sea voyage. (Peck, 6)

The waterways serves as a symbol for the psychological turmoil and moral uncertainty present in shifts between realms. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) utilizes the sea as a symbol for the flow of time and the emotional tides of human

connections. Woolf states that the ocean, with its constantly shifting emotions, appeared to possess the mysteries of existence, immense and incomprehensible. The ocean serves as a reflection of the character's inner selves, showcasing their aspirations, doubts and the certitude of transformation.

In Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), through the journey across the sea migrants embark on distressing but also life-changing ordeal. Hamid expresses that the waves appeared on extend infinitely, akin to time itself, yet they bore the hope of something in the novel. The crossing embodies the hope and danger of migration, emphasizing the strength needed to undertake these journeys. In modern novels, the emotional impact of the sea is frequently associated with themes of survival and resilience. For migrants and refugees, the ocean symbolizes a place where hope and despair intertwine. The action of crossing which filled with danger yet fuelled by need and underscores the strength of people who face not just physical but also emotional and existential hurdles. Ocean is serving as a symbol of change and migration, embodies the intricacies of human mobility and the significant alterations.

In Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Second class Citizen* (1974) explores the dimension of the sea through their characters Adah & Nnu Ego. Both the characters travel from their native land in a hope on following her dreams and economic stability. The protagonist crossing the ocean is not just the travel it's a transformation of their culture both in physical mode and psychological part. Emecheta's protagonist Adah had a view about England that she had always thought that England was a land flowing milk and honey; she found instead that it was cold and unwelcoming. 'England gave Adah a cold welcome' (Emecheta, 1974, 36), this line expresses her separation from expectation of her dream and real world scenario. It merges both hope for a new start and aloneness that happens with leaving one's root place.

In *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), the character Nnu Ego's life journey from her village to Lagos mirrors the opportunities which she is going to gain in the new area and the challenges which is going to be faced by her as a woman and as a mother. 'Nnu Ego herself imagined they must be near the end of the earth so it was that Nnu Ego arrived in Lagos' (Emecheta, 1979, 40), in this line Nnu Ego's emotional position comes along with joys and sorrows. Emecheta captures and tangled African women's involvement in both traditional and modern contexts, making her works lasting explorations of resilience and identity.

3. Women and Maritime Journeys of Survival.

Stuart Pierson review about the novel *The Shipping News* (1993) by E. Annie Proulx, states.

There's two ways of living here now. There's the old way, look out for your family, die where you are born, fish, cut your wood, keep a garden, made do with what you got. Then there's the new way. Work out, have a job, somebody to tell you what to do, commute, your brother's in South Africa, your mother's in Regina, buy every goddamn cockadoodle piece of Japanese crap you can. Leave home ... (p. 285-6)

The above lines explain the survival possibilities of the mankind, against a world of modern freedom in which a woman can be visible. In Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) the ocean is a recurring symbol that highlights the destructive effects of conflict and displacement. The character Hiroko Tanaka ponders the ocean that divided her from her history in Nagasaki: "The sea... bore the burden of everything she had lost, its expanse a harsh reminder of the gap between what existed the what would never happen." (104) For Hiroko, the ocean represents a gendered journey of sorrow and strength, symbolizing her efforts to reconstruct her life amid profound loss.

Emecheta contemplates that Adah's voyage across the sea serve as a powerful symbol of the difficulties of migration, intensified by her experience as a woman facing a patriarchal and racist world. Emecheta assumes that women will invariably travel and recount their travels in a fundamentally different way from men. Emecheta's survival in maritime journey deeply rooted in her own tradition which broadens implication of colonialism and modernity. In Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), the character Nnu Ego's life is a piercing example of a woman nabbed between the tides of traditional culture and the demands of colonial Lagos. Nnu Ego sacrifice her whole life for the wellbeing of her children and make her living in better way. Emecheta highlights the capability and limitations of women concord in patriarchal society

4. Women's Agency in Maritime Realities.

Although maritime contexts frequently underscore the weaknesses of women, they also function as arenas where female figures demonstrate their autonomy and confront conventional gender norms. The ocean, with its unpredictability and capacity for change, turns into a platform for women's empowerment and personal growth. Stanley states that, 'The popular images we have of women on pirate vessels is an unrealistic composite which reflects little of their lives' (*And after the cross-dressed cabin boys and whaling wives? Possible futures for women's maritime historiography*). Women were not explored fully in the maritime subject. In our tradition women role in relation to maritime have been restricted to an extent.

In history, 1650-1720 was the Golden Age of Piracy, in this period some prominent figures like Grace O'Malley, Anne Bonny and Mary Read, explicate women who opposed societal expectations by taking on the roles of men which is reserved for them. In *Old Man and the Sea* (1952) by Ernest Hemingway, Santiago refers the sea as a women and quotes 'her wild behaviour is beyond her control (??)'. Emecheta's novels explore the maritime as a space where women from post-colonial contexts navigate patriarchal, colonial and economic systems to assert autonomy and redefine their identities. In Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) Nue Ego's connection with water ranging from rivers to cityscapes influenced by the Atlantic mirrors makes self-discovery in her path. Her tragedy lies in her inability to escape the currents of expectation, yet her endurance itself becomes a form of agency.

5. Survival Amidst the Sea's Perils.

In Naomi Novik's *His Majesty's Dragon* (2006) the Napoleonic Wars naval battles feature dragon rides, blending maritime adventure with feminist reclamation of traditionally male genres. In Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black* (2018) follows a former enslaved boy turned marine explorer intertwining survival with themes of race and identity. For women, surviving the sea often means defying societal norms. Emecheta focus on domestic slavery rather than plantation labour which is well narrated in her novel *The Slave Girl* (1977).

Emecheta's works employ maritime imagery to examine the challenges faced by African women, and that survival is redefined as a constant form of resistance against universal reclamation when confronting oppression. In her novel *The Slave Girl* (1977) the character Ojebeta, a six years girl child was sold into household slavery by her brother for his coming of age celebration. Ojebeta's existence depends on maneuvering through a reality where her physical form and work are treated as commodities. In *Second Class Citizen* (1974) there undertakes a physical voyage across the sea from Nigeria to London during 1960s in thinking of pursuing knowledge and freedom. Emecheta depicts Adah's strength as a type of ocean navigation. She accepts the unwelcoming society with its violent relationships and complete bias. This novel challenges the illusion of the Promised Land depicting migration as a dangerous journey where survival requires determination and steadfast identity.

6. Women and Exploitation in Maritime Trade.

Maritime trade has been a cornerstone of global commerce for centuries. Women have been involved as passengers, workers in the ports and engaged in trade but they faced exploitation in many ways. In literature maritime offers a difficult exploration of exploitation and struggle for woman which has been a male dominated domain.

In Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969) women's life in Caribbean society are impacted by the transatlantic slave trade. According to Marshall the sea carried their ancestors, yet its currents still echoed the unmet responsibilities of the past with a murmur of sorrow and labour. The tremendous impact of historical injustices is highlighted by the long-lasting consequences of maritime exploitation on women's life.

7. Maritime Commerce as a Reflection of Colonial Power.

Historically, maritime trade routes have served as instruments of colonial power, facilitating resource extraction and the oppression of colonized populations. Novels examining this theme frequently criticize the power structures that sustain exploitation disguised as trade. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) the inherent exploitation in maritime trade is exposed through the ivory business in colonial Congo. The main character Marlow examines that there is a trace of death,

a taste of morality in lies, which is precisely what the world despised and forgets. The dehumanizing consequences highlights the ethical decay at the core of colonial sea trade.

Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) examines the wider effects of colonial trade, as Adah's move to England is influenced by the economic disparities between the colonizer and the colonized. The ocean journey that brings her to a new existence represents both chance and exploitation. In the novel the vessels represented a pathway to a brighter future, yet it bore the burden of stories inscribed in the dialect of grief.

8. Resistance and Survival in Maritime Contexts.

The novels states being a foreigner resembles a never ending pregnancy in an ongoing anticipation, a relentless weight, and a persistent sense of unease. Their desire to return is expressed not through a physical trip but in their attempts to maintain cultural practices in an unfamiliar place, representing their link to home. In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) Captain Ahab's brutal thinking after the white whale manifest a worthless resistance against nature itself. His search created a battle between man and beast, becomes a metaphor for humanity's conceit in challenging the natural world.

S. T. Colreidge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) recollects the sailor's experience who is back from his long journey. The mariner kills an albatross during his journey which driven the agony of his guilt. It triggers a supernatural punishment, forcing him to confront the consequences of defying ecological balance. In Emecheta's novel *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and *In the Ditch* (1972) the protagonist Adah, who makes a journey from their home land to a new country, face survival issues. First Adah heard many positive things/ news about the new land through their own native peoples. She reached the new land with the same thought. But after landing, she knows the reality of the place and started to act against, but slowly she adopts herself to the new land for her survival purpose. It allows the representation of the instability and unpredictability of identity. In these texts, travel creates a geographic in-between space for these women that allows them to contest essentialized views of their identities and narrate their own individual, hybrid, cross-cultural, and transnational identities that continually undergo transformation and change. These works show a truth that survival at sea may often demands humid adaptation and respect for forces beyond human control.

9. The Symbolic Nature of Return.

In literature the word 'return' expresses the coming back to their own place this has been shown in Chinua Achebe's work *Things fall apart* (1958), Okonkwo's return from his exile, he witnessed the collapse of traditional society under colonial pressure. His physical return often reveals the impossibility of reversing time.

For numerous diasporic characters, the concept of returning relates less to the actual act of returning to the homeland

and more to the restoration of a sense of identity and belonging. This meaningful return frequently includes recalling memories, customs and cultural rituals that maintain the concept of home. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) the main character Ifeemelu's eventual homecoming to Nigeria after years spent in the United States emphasizes the intricacies of the diasporic journey. Adichie states that depart from Nigeria, convinced that she would never return.

Conclusions.

Journey is a worldwide theme that occurs across literature from its beginnings until the present days. The ocean, in its expansive and mysterious essence, transforms into a realm where individuals face their most profound anxieties, dreams and ties to their surroundings. Authors encourages readers to contemplate humanity's bond with the ocean and the wider consequences of this association for social and environmental issues. In numerous novels, the ocean represents the intricacies of human life. It symbolizes the difficulties of life and the strength needed to cope with them.

In Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) the sea serves as both an enemy and a friend to Santiago. Hemingway states that the ocean encompasses everything. It accounts for seven-tenths of the Earth's surface. Its breaths are clean and wholesome. It is a vast desert, where a person is never alone, as he senses life moving around him. This representation corresponds with Emecheta's illustration of the sea as a power that influences human experience, in both isolated and connected times.

In Buchi Emecheta's novels the ocean and rivers are connected with concepts of survival, defiance and also states that the waters bore not only the remnants of conflict, but also the unyielding spirit of those who aspired for a brighter future. Emecheta reflects the duality of the sea as a witness to human distress and a symbol of hope. Nautical motifs in literature provide a deep context for exploring the connections between people, history and the environment. Buchi Emecheta's works add to this tradition by incorporating maritime elements into her examination of cultural resilience, social equity and individual transformation. Through Emecheta intricate depictions of the sea and rivers emphasizes the link between individual and collective identities with the nautical environment. The enduring significance of maritime themes in promoting ecological awareness, critiquing past abuses and honoring human resilience by connecting Emecheta's works to wider literary traditions. Our maritime realities act as both motivation and warnings, encouraging us to respect the sea's strength and delicacy.

References.

- Allende, Isabel. *Daughter of Fortune*. HarperCollins Publisher, 1999.
- Amoyeze, C. "Writing a New Reputation: Liminality and Bicultural Identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1–9.

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New American Library, 1950.
- D'Aguiar, Fred. *Feeding the Ghosts*. Vintage, 1997.
- . “The Last Essay About Slavery.” *The Age of Anxiety*, edited by Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter, Virago, 1997.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. “Writing Off Marginality, Minorizing, and Effacement.” *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1991, pp. 249–263.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, and George B. Handley, editors. *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Emecheta, Buchi. *In the Ditch*. Barrie & Jenkins, 1972.
- . *Second-Class Citizen*. Heinemann, 1974.
- . *The Bride Price*. George Braziller, 1976.
- . *The Slave Girl*. Heinemann, 1977.
- . *The Joys of Motherhood*. Heinemann, 1979.
- . *Destination Biafra*. Fontana, 1982.
- . *Head Above Water*. Fontana, 1986.
- . *The New Tribe*. Heinemann, 2000.
- Froude-Durix, Claude. “Anonymity, Naming, and Memory in Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*: Islands of Fiction in a Sea of History.” *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1998, pp. 47–54.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*. Penguin, 2008.
- Giovanni, Nikki. Review of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. *Negro Digest*, Jan. 1970.
- Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Goldman, Jane. *Introduction to Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Scribner, 1952.
- Shamsie, Kamila. *Burnt Shadows*. Bloomsbury, 2009.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Ledent, Bénédicte. “Remembering Slavery: History as Roots in the Fiction of Caryl Phillips and Fred D'Aguiar.” *The Context and the Culmination: Essays in Honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek*, edited by Marc Delrez and Bénédicte Ledent, L3-Liège Language and Literature, 1997.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Picador, 1988.
- Naydan, Liliana M. “Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2019.
- Northrup, David. *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Okafor, Clement A. “Exile and Identity in Buchi Emecheta's *The New Tribe*.” *New Women's Writing in African Literature*, edited by Ernest Emenyonu, James Currey, 2004.
- Peck, John. *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels, 1719–1917*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
- Phiri, Angeline. “Expanding Black Subjectivities in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2017, pp. 121–142.
- Pierson, Stuart. “Reviews.” Review of *The Shipping News*, by E. Annie Proulx. Scribner, 1993.
- Plasa, Carl, and Betty J. Ring, editors. *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn and Toni Morrison*. Routledge, 1994.
- Sherman, Nancy. *The Untold War: Inside the Hearts, Minds, and Souls of Our Soldiers*. Norton, 2010.
- Stanley, Jo. “And After the Cross-Dressed Cabin Boys and Whaling Wives? Possible Futures for Women's Maritime Historiography.” *Journal of Transport History*, Jan. 2002.
- Suleri, Sara. “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Post-colonial Condition.” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920*. Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Woolf, Virginia. *The Waves*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1931.
- . *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*. Wordsworth Editions, 2005.
- . *To the Lighthouse*. The Hogarth Press, 1977.
- “Independent Woman.” *Urban Dictionary*, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=independentwoman.
- “Teori Hubungan Gender Melahirkan Feminisme.” Elizabeth-louise-fisip12.web.unair.ac.id, elizabethlouisefisip12.web.unair.ac.id/artikel_detail-81934-TeoriHubunganGenderMelahirkanFeminisme.html.
- “Life of Women in the Victorian Era.” *Ezine Articles*, ezine-articles.com/?Life-of-Women-in-the-Victorian-Era&id=2.
- Sapp, Stephen. “Feminist Theory.” Iowa State University, www.soc.iastate.edu/Sapp/Feminist.ppt.
- “Expanding Black Subjectivities in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*.” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095-02386.2016.1232422>.
- “Nalans Article.” *Nalans*, nalans.com/index.php/nalans/article/view/145/108.
- “Digital Screens and National Divides.” *Studies in the Novel*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017712773>.