

Africa and India in the Novels of Dai and Emecheta

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**Debarshi Prasad Nath and Juri Dutta,**  
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**Abstract:** In their article "Africa and India in the Novels of Dai and Emecheta" Debarshi Prasad Nath and Juri Dutta discusses the work of two writers belonging to different continents, India and Nigeria. Interestingly, the novels of the two writers Dutta is analyzing — Lummer Dai and Buchi Emecheta — never heard of each other. Both novels are based on the custom of bride price, both writers speak out against the stifling rigidity of traditional customs, and uphold aspects of modernity in languages other than their native tongues. At the same time, both writers affirm the sanctity of the traditional institutions and customs. Emecheta relates her novel through the woman's voice and describes the limited choices available for her protagonist against the overarching presence of the traditional institutions. Dai's novel, on the other hand, presents a more optimistic picture regarding the possibility of change through his protagonist who successfully overcomes the immediate obstacles on her way to self-fulfillment.

## Debarshi Prasad NATH and Juri DUTTA

### Africa and India in the Novels of Dai and Emecheta

Buchi Emecheta's description of female experience in Africa has earned her international fame. What sets her apart as a novelist is the unmistakably woman's and African point of view she adopts in her narrative: she looks at African women's issues from a gendered perspective (Katrak). Although there is often a tendency amongst scholars critics to label her as a feminist, Emecheta has differentiated her own Afrocentric perspective from that of her Western counterparts (see Nnaemeka; Stratton). Critics and scholars praised Emecheta's narrative prowess, her psychological probing of female protagonists, and her powerful social critique of traditional African culture, as well as Western colonialism (see Dubek; Lauer; Stratton). Emecheta writes about the injustice of male prejudice and the inflexible social structures in her native country in *The Bride Price* without romanticizing about it. Emecheta writes about the injustice of male prejudice and the inflexible social structures in her native country in *The Bride Price*. The novel is set in Lagos and Ibadan during the 1950s, the protagonist is Aku-nna, a Nigerian girl whose father dies when she is thirteen, leaving her in the charge of her father's brother. The only reason why her uncle allows Aku-nna's schooling to continue is because he hopes that it will increase her bride price. However, much to the chagrin of her relatives, she falls in love with her teacher, Chike, who belongs to a family of slaves and whose social status prohibits their involvement. While Chike and his family are able to do well within colonial Nigeria, their choices, particularly when it comes to being fully merged in African society, is limited (on this, see, e.g. Ilo). Regardless of the opposition of her family and a potential suitor who kidnaps her, Aku-nna elopes with Chike and thus deprives her uncle of her bride price. In the end Aku-nna dies in childbirth, as if to prove the fateful superstition that a woman whose bride price is unpaid will not survive the birth of her first child.

Through the story of Aku-Nna, Emecheta illustrates the value of education and self-determination for aspiring young women who struggle against sexual inequity, racism, and miserable marital arrangements to achieve individuality and independence. Emecheta is as critical of patriarchal African society as she is aware of the intrinsic value of Native folk wisdom. While critical of patriarchal tribal culture, Emecheta's fiction reveals an abiding reverence for African heritage and folklore which reflects the divided loyalties of Africans torn between the competing claims of tradition and modernity. Emecheta's novel follows the clash between emerging modern values changing African lives and the traditional ways of life Africans continue to cling to. Emecheta believes in reformation of the existing order rather than a complete overthrow. In the light of this, we intend to make sense of the means of resistance adopted by the protagonist Aku-Nna. However, Aku-Nna's stunning act of defiance of the traditional order (her marriage with Chike) needs to be contextualized before it is analyzed.

In five of his six published novels, Lummer Dai wrote about the Adis of Arunachal Pradesh, a northeastern state of India. Dai is a pioneering writer of Arunachal Pradesh and was serving as the director of the Department of Information and Public Relation (on Dai, see, e.g., Dutta). He not only had access to governmental policy making but was also in the know of the transformations taking place in the urban Arunachal of today. However, as he was a first generation literate, coming originally from rural Arunachal, he also had a close sense of affiliation with his roots. This provided him with a two-fold advantage: he could keep shifting between two worlds with which he was equally familiar and this probably made him equipped to write about the process of transition that Arunachal Pradesh went through in the postcolonial period of India. Dai wrote in Assamese, the language of the neighboring state of Assam. Assamese was the medium of instruction in educational institutes of Arunachal Pradesh until about twenty-nine years back. In an interview, Dai said that "I think that mother tongue is the best medium to express one's feelings. Assamese is not my mother tongue. But I have an association with the Assamese language since the time I was being suckled by my mother" (Dai qtd. in Bhuyan 3).

Dai received the Sitanath Brahma Choudhuri Award from the Assam Sahitya Sabha for *Kanyar Mulya* (*The Bride Price*) published in 1978 and it continues to be his most well known novel. It depicts the Adi social life through its presentation of the social institution of marriage. The protagonist Gumba is a victim of the tradition of taking and giving bride price that was prevalent among the Adis. Her protest against the long-established system of child marriage almost plunges her into death. Kargum,

her father, is a representative of the old generation who strictly adheres to traditions, social practices and beliefs, but finds himself in conflict between his love, care, and sense of duty for his daughter and his "accountability" to society. According to the social custom of the Adis, the marriage of a girl was fixed at an early age, sometimes just after birth, taking the price of the bride from the groom's family. In *Kanyar Mulya*, when Gumba is still a child, her father Kargum enters into an agreement with Mindak according to which after a certain period of time Gumba will have to go to Mindak's house as the wife of his son Dakat. Even before she comes to know about her own marriage, Gumba voices her feelings against child marriage and the bride price custom while talking to her friend: "Man considers woman as a commodity. Immediately after a female baby is born, they think that it is the acquisition of a new property. This custom of selling and buying of girls must be done away with at the earliest (*Kanyar* 8; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Gumba is taken away to her in-laws' place and undertakes a fast to protest against the tyranny she is subjected to. In fact, she is determined not to surrender till death: "I am fighting against acts of inhumanity and barbarism that are committed against women" (*Kanyar* 65). At the end of the novel we are given to understand that Gumba's bride price is returned, setting her free to pursue her aspirations.

There is a distinct note of feminism in the novel. Dai has shown the traditional patriarchal society of the Adis as it is, without any attempt to scoff at it. Feminism is manifested in the novel in the form of a protest against the established patriarchal norms and the attempt to establish one's own identity. There are two aspects of Emecheta's and Dai's novels which make an impact on readers: both writers write in languages which are not their native tongues. In ethnolinguistic research attention is paid to the way in which perception and conceptualization influence language and show how this is linked in different cultures and societies. Talking about the difficulties associated with the act of translating the images, symbols, and idioms of the native language into a new language, Tilottoma Misra argues that "language cannot be separated from the material lives of the people and from the culture which it reflects" (3653). Having said this, one is of course aware of the wider implications of the idea of translation because in a sense all writing is an act of translation. Misra (3653) uses Minakshi Mukherjee's phrase "twice born fiction" to refer to Dai's works within the context of Indian Literature (3653). Dai's writings, like Emecheta's, transcend the boundary of their Native cultures to be available for a wider readership. Arunachal Pradesh exemplifies the adage of "divided loyalties" when it came to the use of Assamese as link-language vis-à-vis Hindi. After the independence of India, successive generations of Arunachalese had to grapple with the issue of conflicting loyalties towards these two languages. Hindi was a must for national integration and with the threat of China always looming large over Arunachal, administrative policies of the Indian government favored the use of Hindi. However, for historical reasons (starting with trading activities with the people of the neighbouring regions) many felt that Assamese would be the appropriate language of communication.

The myth that the British generally followed a policy of non-intervention when it came to Arunachal was disproved by Sudatta Sarkar in his study on British capitalis involvement and influence on the economy of Arunachal Pradesh in the nineteenth century. As Sarkar points out, Arunachal was not just strategically important for the British to further trans-Himalayan trade but also to some extent because Arunachal provided a market, however small, for the introduction of European goods amongst the tribes. In an attempt to popularize the local products of Arunachal, the British authorities, for example in the London exhibition of 1862, displayed coal from Tirap, limestone from Digaru hills, Aconite (Mishmi Bih), mineral water from Singhpo area, and madder from Miri, Dafla, Abor, etc. (Sarkar 22). To exploit these resources commercial intercourse between the hills and the plains was encouraged but certain changes were introduced in the traditional structure to suit colonial needs. India with its philosophy of "unity in diversity" encouraged the homogenization of identity in the states of the North East, Arunachal included. For the Natives of states like Arunachal, the issue of identity was further complicated because of the presence of multiple pan-Indian and Native inheritance. While looking at the writings of a writer like Dai these issues need to be addressed because such a situation is bound to have an ambivalent relationship with the lost and acquired traditions caught by the urge to abandon and accept traditions in partial terms. The process of decolonization in the context of Arunachal needs to be seen not just as a matter of transference of colonial power, but as a process enmeshed within the politics of regionalism in India. Alienated from power structures, social recognition, and crippled in expression with a language of which meaning is

predicated by the population from the plains, the writer from the hills (the North East) in the postcolonial situation, consciously and unconsciously, finds himself/herself at a crossroad of various traditions. The identity of the Arunachalee writer as Indian writer writing in Assamese inevitably confronts a dilemma of loyalty. The principal cultures of India do not undergo a fusion in the tradition of writers like Dai, but are subjected to a "re-vision" expressed through an assorted discourse. Leaving the track of an exclusive preoccupation with any single culture or literary tradition, the Arunachalee writer, akin to women writers of postcolonial nations such as Nigeria, accommodates the twin processes of rejection and acceptance as a survival strategy on this, see, e.g. Anyokwu).

Considerable attention has been given by political elites in the postcolonial states in the twentieth century to "language planning," a branch of "decision-making that goes into determining what language use is appropriate in particular speech communities" (Laitin 289). Postcolonial states have sought to promote language standardization within their boundaries. For example, Nigeria, like India, is home to hundreds of languages. The second edition of *An Index of Nigerian Languages* lists over four hundred languages (see Crozier and Blench). Nigeria thus has a multiethnic policy which not only faces the threat of a Balkanization growing out of a linguistic regionalism but is also faced with the prospect of the deluge of neo-imperialism in cultural matters. Karin Barber argues that the "postcolonial" brand of criticism of the 1980s and 1990s has helped to foster a binary and generalized model of the world which has had the effect of eliminating African-language expression from view. This model has helped to create and sustain a distorted picture of "the colonial experience" and the place of language in that experience (3). It has maintained a West versus East polarization and both overemphasizes and makes simpler the nature of the effects of colonial imposition of European languages. In doing this, postcolonialism often turns both the colonizing countries and the colonized subject into homogenized entities: "Despite intermittent claims to specificity, this model blocks a properly historical, localized understanding of any scene of colonial and post-Independence literary production in Africa. Instead it selects and overemphasizes one sliver of literary and cultural production-written literature in the English language-and treats this as all there is, representative of a whole culture or even a whole global 'colonial experience'" (Barber 3).

Thomas J. Davis and Azubike Kalu-Nwivu suggest that while it is pointless to overstate the oft-repeated view of the impact of colonial imposition of European languages in Africa, it is true that education in colonial Nigeria, as in India, sought to suit Indigenous peoples to serve the colonialists' needs and not to allow them to live in profitable harmony with their fellow colonized peoples (5). In many ways the colonial education system helped to shift attention away from their Indigenous environment toward the colonialist environment and thus "value" derived less from education for living than from education for earning a position in the colonialist scheme. Such employment ensured the rise in social status to a level unrealizable in other ways. Thus, demand for education went hand-in-hand with the supply of employment. Outside the market existing in the enclave, education had relatively no value and stimulated little demand. Therefore, competition was keenest where European activities concentrated. The colonial school system produced little common socialization among Nigeria's regional ethnic groups (Davis and Kalu-Nwivu 5). Instead, it encouraged exclusivism. Rather than developing a sense of community, it magnified differences and it engendered discordant sentiments of inferiority and superiority as ethnic groups with a greater number of Western-educated members disdained other ethnic groups for their relative lack of Western education. These issues need to be understood in the context of Emecheta's *Bride Price*. According to Michael C. Onwuemene, in the postcolonial stage Nigerians realized that if they wished to be respected among the nations of the world, they had to develop autochthonous cultural norms and standards and not have norms and standards imposed on them from the outside (1056). Chinua Achebe and his fellow writers realized this and saw that if they adopted the English spoken as their model for literary expression, they could not escape cultural domination in literature and so they intended to write a modified variety of English which would be their own creation and a valuable contribution to nation building.

What strikes readers as important when one does a comparative study of these two texts is the mode of resistance that is adopted by the female protagonists of Dai and Emecheta when they are faced with a similar predicament. Gumba's protest and resistance is unmistakably Indian, to be more particular, Gandhian. It is of course an undeniable fact that Gandhian thought made a deep impact on the creative writers of India during the 1930s and 1940s and continues to have an impact on many

writers even today. Gandhian ideology was influential in shaping the consciousness of the first Jnanapith Awardee from Assam, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya in novels like *Mrityunjay*. And not so incidentally, Bhattacharyya was the mentor of Dai in his formative years. Popular accounts of *satyagraha* (the idea of insistence on truth [Ghandi]) are unanimous in their view that the Gandhian intervention into the Indian national movement was unique precisely for its mobilization of women, "thousands of whom," in Mahadev Desai's words, "marched to jail at his word" (Desai qtd. in Kishwar 13). Memoirs by women who participated in the national movement, likewise, record the way in which the appeal of *ahimsa* (non-violence) enabled them to leave "home" for the political "world." Partha Chatterjee discusses how the discourse of nationalism uses the distinction between the feminized home and the masculinized world to designate home as the proper domain of its cultural and Gandhian spiritual identity.

The effect of the Gandhian "figuration" of woman is twofold. First, by grounding *satyagraha*, or *ahimsaic* activism within a feminized semiotic, Gandhi "ostensibly feminizes the activity of resistance" (Gandhi, Leela 110). This gesture, in turn, carries within it an implicit critique or repudiation of masculinity-as expressed in the inherently violent or *himsaic* nature of male sexuality, and, thus, also in the patriarchal family whose structure necessitates and condones repetitive acts of male sexual violence on the bodies of naturally non-consenting women. The patriarchal family, in other words, represents for Gandhi an excuse for the sexual "violation" of women. In his words: "Young men in India ... are married early.... Nobody tells them to exercise restraint in married life. Parents are impatient to see grandchildren. The poor girl wives are expected by their surroundings to bear children as fast as they can" (Ghandi, M.K. 116). M.K. Gandhi insists that in order to counter nonviolently "insane wars of nations upon nations . . . the woman will have to play her part not man-fully, as some are trying to do, but woman-fully. She won't better humanity by vying with man in his ability to destroy life mostly without purpose" (173-74). At the same time, the gender crises in Nigeria cannot be explained merely by looking at it through the perspective of Western feminism. Rather, it ought to be read in terms of a conflict re-territorialized into a manifold difficulty in which women must "fight" against god, imperialism, racism, and patriarchy either simultaneously or one after another. This predicament extends beyond the familiar notion of double colonization characterized by Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford in the preface of their anthology of essays *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women's Writing*. In any case, there is a long-standing philosophical tradition which believes that language is a deceitful medium and that each of us whatever our sex is trapped inside the language we speak. Linguistically speaking, women are doubly disadvantaged in being prisoners of the male prisoners in the prison-house of language. But women's writing is characterized by the singularity and clarity of its resistance to the gender rooted aspect of any tradition, colonial or postcolonial.

African women writers have been sensitive to the complexities of "primordial psychocultural circumstances" (Nwankwo 200) and thus have tended to tread cautiously in the path of resistance. If the choice for African women had been to fight patriarchal culture alone, it would be akin to the old cliché of trying to fell a tree by cutting down its branches. Too often, masculinist cultural critics and Eurocentric feminist critics each read their valorized category allegorically and then use it to displace and replace gender or race, respectively. That is, for Eurocentric feminists, race is merely a trope for gender and another way to understand the larger oppression of women. For masculinist cultural critics, the privileged category of race subsumes all others: gender serves as a lens through which the greater oppression of Non-Europeans can be understood. Neither of the above theoretical positions offers a space from which African feminist criticism can be articulated for neither is able to address the heterogeneity that an analysis of African women's texts must foreground: to respect the cultural heterogeneity of Africa as well as that of African women (Andrade 94).

Edith Kohrs-Amisshah points out the failure of Western feminism to capture successfully the experience of Black women. Achieving equality between the African men and women will still leave the problems of neocolonialism, racism, and imperialism. Kohrs-Amisshah proposes the term African(a) womanism as an alternative for Black feminism. According to Kohrs-Amisshah, Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi "define womanism within a black context as the coming of age of a young woman which brings about the emergence of femaleness" (27). Ogunyemi lays stress on womanism "as a black global ideology which encompasses issues of racism, imperialism and sexism"

(27). The Africana womanist position is that the framework for a world free of patriarchal oppression already exists within the traditional African philosophical worldview — if only the Africana woman would claim it. In this context, one may cite the example of Achebe: in interviews, essays, and fiction Achebe returns again and again to the principle which is at the core of Igbo philosophy and cultural traditions, namely the principle of duality and difference as necessary conditions of existence. He interprets the Igbo proverb "Wherever something stands, something else will stand beside it" to mean: "that there is no one way to anything. The Ibo people who made that proverb are very insistent on this — there is no absolute anything. They are against excess — their world is a world of dualities. It is good to be brave, they say, but also remember that the coward survives (Achebe qtd. in Moyers 333). Achebe broadens his explanation to cover spiritual and religious beliefs: "if there is one God, fine. There will be others as well. If there is one point of view, fine. There will be a second point of view" (Achebe qtd. in Moyers 333). This concept of "a second point of view" is "one of the central themes of my life" and is reflected in even his earliest work (Scafe 119) and C.A Diop describes traditional African monarchy as follows: "[It] is not an absolute and cynical triumph of woman over man; it is a harmonious dualism, an association accepted by both sexes, the better to build a sedentary society where each and everyone could fully develop by following the activity best suited to his physiological nature" (108).

The Africana Womanist position becomes even more problematic in the case of a writer like Emecheta, who, although having been born and brought up in Nigeria, started her writing career in England. Born in Lagos and raised in the nearby village of Ibuza, Emecheta received traditional Ibo upbringing and observed the coexistence of Indigenous African culture and urban Western values in her society. Although schooling for girls was discouraged, Emecheta managed to receive an education at a missionary school where she was taught English in addition to her several Native languages. Bound by Ibo custom, she left school at age sixteen to marry a man to whom she had been engaged since she was eleven years old. Emecheta gave birth to their first child at age seventeen and by twenty-two was mother of five. Shortly after her marriage she moved to London where her husband had already moved to study. While working odd jobs at the Library of the British Museum and a youth center to support her family, Emecheta devoted herself to writing in her spare time. Despite efforts by her abusive husband to undermine her literary aspirations, Emecheta eventually published several of her diary entries in *New Statesman*, which later became the material for her first book, *In the Ditch* (1972). While still in England she completed two additional books, *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Bride Price*, and then moved to the United States where she supported herself as a social worker.

Dai confided in an interview that he had once seen a young girl forcefully taken away by an aged man. Although this was a painful experience for Dai, he never learned what happened to the girl after this. The unmistakable streak of reformist zeal that is clearly discernible in the later works of Lummer Dai has clearly a lot to do with the social role that he was playing in those days. *Kanyar Mulya* was published in the days when he was serving as a Public Relations Officer. Gumba constantly speaks out against the practice of bride price in the novel *Kanyar Mulya* even before she is aware of the fact that she herself is a victim of the same practice. Thus the motive for Gumba's protest comes from without: it comes from none other than Dai himself. Apparently it seems that the Dai tried to portray his society as it is without any intention of reforming it. But we can say that being indifferent to a social custom of his society that is the root of so much pain, trauma, and agony (not only for a single individual but for different people of the society) is neither easy nor at all possible. We can trace the Dai's intention to speak for reformation of some age old custom in different situations. In the cultural program organized to welcome the District Commissioner, the chorus sung by the youths is such an occasion that reflects the writer's motive: To take the price of your daughter is to drink your own blood (*Kanyar* 30-31). It is this sense of reformation which enables the writer to offer a happy ending of the novel where Gumba can protest against the custom of bride price and set herself free. Dai could not accept the fatal end of a girl due to the age-old custom of bride price. The anxiety within him is whether to follow the tradition and accept the age-old custom or to raise a voice of protest against such custom resulting in pain and suffering and even the end of a life. Therefore, Dai proposes arguments for and against the custom of bride price in his novel *Kanyar Mulya*. In the *Kebang*, the judicial platform for the Adis, Dai presents different chiefs championing various mottos and views. The *kebang* where Gumba's case is discussed

is not only a trial but a battle ground between tradition and modernity. It reflects the conflicts of age old beliefs and new realisations. Minjum's long lecture depicts the change that has come about in the attitude of the new generation: "The problem is not regarding the return of bride price. We have a problem with child-marriage and forced-marriage. We, the men, have been torturing the souls of countless women and still we are not contented. When a baby girl is born we think that she will add to our property" (*Kanyar* 94). The last chapter of the novel is the expression of the writer's confusion whether to accept or reject the age-old tradition or custom. Here, the dilemma for Dai is whether to risk a life advocating an age-old custom or to speak against it for the peace and progress of society. It is to be noted that finally it is the *kebang* which provides succour to the mentally and physically devastated Gumba. In doing this, Dai reveals his faith in the ability of the *kebang* to reconcile the conflicting aims of tradition and modernity. Along with the custom of bride price, Dai also hints at the prevalence of slavery that existed in Adi society at one point of time. The novel lets us know that the government released all the slaves just after independence (*Kanyar* 22) and Dai introduces his readers to this custom of slavery of Adi society with a clear mention of it: "Talk sensibly. It is because the govt has set you free that you are here to speak. Otherwise, you are still a slave. Even now people know you as a slave. (*Kanyar* 22)

In the novels of Dai and Emecheta the nature of the traditional institution of marriage helps to call forth in the man traits of the master rather than the companion and the male characters emerge as unsavoury types not because of their basic nature but because society has given them privileges. Kargum, Gumba's father, is seen to be overwhelmed by some situations and utters words which express his mental agony and inner conflict. For example, when thinking about Gumba, he says that "She is old enough to go to her in-laws' place. She should be sent there. What will she do in school? She will never be an officer. But what if she does become one? (*Kanyar* 1). In Emecheta's *The Bride Price* Okoboshie (Oko/male, Oshie/thief, i.e., the male is a gendered "thief") is the nascent type of a long gallery of male characters who are frustrated by personal, real, or imagined inadequacy and are therefore designed to play the abusive role of master in the master/slave relation created by traditional marriage sanctions. What Emecheta highlights is the disguised dependency that makes the system open to abuse and to emphasize the female viewpoint Emecheta creates characters like chief Agbadi, Nwokocha, and Okweboda who are generally abused by society and help to carry on this tyranny at home. Emecheta explores the normal situations in a polygamous home when affection cannot possibly be shared equally among all the wives. In spite of this, however, she is not unaware of the traditional ideal of the strength of marriage as a social institution. The ideals of idyllic marriage and sexual union lived out by Aku-Nna and Chike stands out in sharp contrast to the men who take out their frustration on women. Chike can relate to women without the social corollary of dominance and enslavement.

Aku-nna's heroism in *The Bride Price* is grounded on her observation of this basic Ibo tenet of chastity before she can attack those others who frustrate her. Raw male aggression is subverted by female strategy when Okoboshi, her kidnapper, is frustrated of his lust. At the moment he has forced her onto bed and is untying her *lappa*, "she laughed like a mad woman ... Look at you, she sneered ... shame on you. Okoboshi. You say your father is a chief — dog chief that is what he is, if the best he can manage to steal for his son is a girl who has been taught what men taste like by a slave (138). In celebrating the female and the limitations of her world, Emecheta makes statements on the human condition and joins the rank of humanists who engineer social change by "telling." The art of recreation and of showing becomes a method towards liberalizing the human consciousness and attaining human freedom. Emecheta expresses herself ambiguously when it comes to the question of traditional values and comments on the psychological hold that the traditional taboos have on young girls: "If the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child. It was a psychological hold over every young girl that would continue to exist, even in the face of every modernization until the present day. Why this is so is, as the saying goes, anybody's guess (168).

In a larger context, "one could see Aku-Nna's death as one of redemption — redeeming the woman's lot" (Solberg 255). A key to such reading is the word "joy" and before Aku-Nna's death Chike promises her that their baby girl will be called Joy. Joy points forward to the new generation which will be safely through the initial effects of the culture collusion, which is in the final analysis what kills Aku-Nna.



While a moralistic and reformist zeal is more evident in Dai's novel, Emecheta problematizes the debate of tradition versus modernity. Emecheta lives in England, writes in English, and is Nigerian with mixed Igbo and Yoruba influences while Dai is an Adi and therefore linked to Arunachal Pradesh, to Assamese, and to English worlds, cultures, and languages. While, in other words, there are multiple universes in both novels — which speak to different knowledge worlds, languages, and cultures, outside of English and Assamese — those other worlds and cultures are by no means identical. What both writers, nonetheless, share in their novels is a focus on finding their voices and identities in the context of the multiple cultures and languages. They operate on more than one level simultaneously — on both the everyday realities and concrete material cultures of their protagonists, as well as their deeper spiritual aspirations. These realities are the thresholds of the language they construct. In both the novels the writers make an attempt to straddle two worlds: the world of Native heritage and the world of the acquired language thereby problematizing the labeling of writers like Dai and Emecheta as cultural insiders. Neither authors nor the narrative voices of the novels can be aligned simply with a monological African or Arunachalee perspective.

Emecheta writes about her childhood alienation from her family's ancestral traditions and her perspective at the "cultural crossroads" is manifest in the narrative voice of *The Bride Price* along a continuum of proximity and distance in relation to the culture it describes. Similarly, Dai's novel reveals a dialogue between the Native Arunachalee world where he grew up and the world of Assamese literature and culture he acquired. Emecheta's and Dai's position vis-à-vis the Igbos and the Adis, respectively, typifies many of the dilemmas of ethnographic observation if we understand the relationship between the observer and the observed to be more complicated than traditional anthropological readings of these novels would assume (on cultural anthropology dealing with such issue, see, e.g., Pinxten). To appreciate the complexities in the narrative voices we need to read the novels not naively as providing a view of an alien culture but meta-ethnographically in a way that attends to the complexity intrinsic to any ethnographic situation. It is the distance in conflict with propinquity to traditional ways that is the enabling condition for Emecheta's and Dai's art. In this way, they resemble the figure of the modern fieldworker in the tradition of Bronislaw Malinowski, whose methodology of participant-observation involves moving back and forth between perspectives by adopting the Native's point of view as a participant, and then pulling back, as an observer, to place customs and beliefs in context (on this, see, e.g., Clifford).

In conclusion, as writers writing in languages other than their Native tongues, Emecheta and Dai — like the traditional anthropologist — face the difficulty of portraying Indigenous experience in a foreign tongue. The non-Native reader is reminded of the act of translation that lies behind the entire work each time he/she reads an untranslated Igbo or Arunachalee word. However, Dai's and Emecheta's knowledge of their own societies is mediated: their knowledge is conditioned to a great extent by their education alien to their own cultures. Dai and Emecheta write from a cultural borderland which becomes an enabling condition for their art. They are "within" these cultures and yet "outside" it. Kirin Narayan has critiqued the idea of a neat distinction between "Native" and "foreign" anthropologists and her arguments apply equally well in the case of fiction: it would indeed be more profitable to see each writer of fiction in "terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations" (Narayan 671). Narayan pleads for an "enactment of hybridity" in anthropological texts and I contend that there is a need to view writers like Emecheta and Dai as belonging simultaneously to the world they write about and the world outside it. And yet, Dai and Emecheta are unlike Malinowski's traditional anthropologist: the writing of fiction cannot be seen and understood as a mere intellectual exercise bereft of a sense of social responsibility. Dai and Emecheta are conscious of their roles as social commentators and the fact that they believe in the relevance of traditional institutions strengthens their intent to preserve and document the vanishing ways of life without sacrificing artistic merit.

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