



1981

Head above water

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Recommended Citation

Emecheta, Buchi, Head above water, *Kunapipi*, 3(1), 1981.
Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol3/iss1/11>

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Abstract

The lively young voices of the girls at the Methodist High School rang out. Their vibrant-silvery echoes burst out of the confines of the school's Assembly Hall, only to reverberate in and among the trees in front of the school compound, and to reach as far as the grey hideous walls that separated the front of the school from the loco-yard opposite. Those grey walls and the elegant trees, all seemed to take up the rhythm of the military Methodist tune in their determination to be like the khakied uniform girls within, pilgrims, pilgrims of Christ.

Head Above Water

I with avowed intent,
To be a Pilgrim...

The lively young voices of the girls at the Methodist High School rang out. Their vibrant silvery echoes burst out of the confines of the school's Assembly Hall, only to reverberate in and among the trees in front of the school compound, and to reach as far as the grey hideous walls that separated the front of the school from the loco-yard opposite. Those grey walls and the elegant trees, all seemed to take up the rhythm of the military Methodist tune in their determination to be like the khakied uniform girls within, pilgrims, pilgrims of Christ.

Hearing those voices from outside the school, the plaintive nostalgic twinge they gave the otherwise orthodox church hymn stood out. The girls did sing in tune, their Welsh Music Mistress, Miss Davies saw to that, yet, and yet, one could tell that those voices were voices from nowhere else than Africa. Because until a few generations back the voices of their grandparents were used in musical village calls, in singing ballads and telling stories in songs, in forest calls and in enhancing the vibrating rhythm of cone-shaped talking drums. Now these girls, the modern girls of twentieth-century Africa, still possess such voices, still with the same strength, still with the same vigour, but now with that added hope and pride, the pride that they were going to be new females of the new Africa. They had been told that their position was unique in history, that they were going to be the black females that would rub shoulders with the types of Miss Davies from Wales, Miss Osborne from Scotland, Miss Verney from England, Miss Humble from Oxford, and Miss Walker from Australia, plus many many other white Missionaries who had left their different countries to come to Lagos, to teach the girls to value their own importance. There were a few black mistresses, one in the Needlework department, and another in the Domestic department, but in the late fifties their influence was still very minimal.

I was late again this morning in leaving my dormitory. I was far from being popular, too shy and too sensitive to be able to forget myself for a while. Because of this, though I craved and bled inwardly for company, yet when in company I was likely to make a fool of myself in doing or saying something wrong, and that wrong thing I would worry about, cry about, bite my nails to the point of almost eating up my fingers. So to be on the safe side I always liked to stay behind deliberately when the others had gone, so that I could read a line of Wordsworth, or a verse of Byron, or Tennyson, then make the short journey from the boarding house, through the trees, that were often still wet from the night dew, with only myself for company, taking my time and walking 'as if next year would do' as our house Mistress, Mrs Okuyemi, often reminded me.

I could deliberate, chew and repeat works of Rupert Brooke, Keats, and Shakespeare, yet I was the daughter of scantily educated parents who came right out of their innocent and yet sophisticated and exotic bush culture. They were innocent to the so-called civilized world. But in communal caring and mutual sharing, in language gestures and music making, they were unsurpassable in their sheer sophistication. But they had to leave all this, my parents, in search of this new thing that was coming from places afar. They left their village homes which had been the habitat of their ancestors so many generations back and came to the city. And there they had me, and they said that I was clever. And they said that because I won something they called scholarship, which my mother used to call 'sikokip', I was to be brought up the new way. That was why instead of being in the village and claying the mud floor of my ancestors, I had to stand there in front of this school compound feeling guilty of having illegally enjoyed Rupert Brooke, and hearing the voices of my already assembled school friends singing.

I sometimes gave the village life a good deal of thought, especially as my people made sure I never lost touch with it. I had to go through all the rituals; tribal marks on the face, clitorisation at the early age of eight to give me sexual self control as a young adult and keep me on the straight and narrow, yet I knew even then that, like my parents, I was trapped in this New Thing. But of course to me and all my friends at the Girls' High School it wasn't a New Thing any more, it was becoming a way of life. I was even then feeling like that Prisoner of Chillon, when he cried,

My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are — even I
Regain'd my freedom with a sigh.

So however much I admired the village life, I knew that for sheer survival I had to make a go of the Education the school was offering me free, when almost all the girls in the school were paying. I had to seek more and more the company of myself because I did not pay for my education, and I knew that that made me feel awful, even though I was not given the scholarship out of charity but because I won it. Though to be fair, my parents could not have paid the high fees, how could they, my father had been long dead, and my mother, though a Christian woman, for the sake of survival had gone back to being a native in our village town Ibuza. So though I felt guilty for being on scholarship I was grateful in a way that I had it, because without that good start which those women gave people like me I wonder if I would be here and if you would be reading these horrors. Still, as I was saying, that morning I was late, and I knew I was in trouble. A big Christian girl of fourteen, behaving like a 'bush' girl, irresponsibly. But inside me I knew that I was both a bush girl and a civilized one. I could play both to perfection, depending on the one that was called for. This morning, the humble, quiet Christian was called for, because I was late.

That was why I ran in, stopping by the door, my eyes lowered, my fat navy blue Methodist hymn book clasped to my flat chest (I was a late developer, too skinny). But horror of horrors, I walked into my form Mistress, Mrs Okuyemi. She was black, she was young, she was beautiful, only she never allowed herself to be beautiful. The only day I knew she could smile was when I left school and ran to her house to tell her that I did well in the West African School Examination. She even entertained me. She gave me and my best friend, Kehinde Lawal, a bowl of mixed fruit salad. She treated us like people. So much so that my friend — she was usually more sensible than I was, and I used to copy everything she did because I did not know any other person to copy — said, 'That lady really tried very much to help us, if only we had listened.' Well, it was too late. We had left school by then, and I was already married, even before our school results came out. Anyway all that was still in the future.

This morning Mrs Okuyemi was sitting by the side of our row, as she should, being our form Mistress. She made way for me, not immediately, but kept me waiting long enough for all the subject teachers to see me, standing there. That stupid Ibo girl, with the marks of '10' on her face, had done it again. I stared at the cemented floor. I would not look at anybody's face. Then the other girls all pretended to be disturbed by my lateness. One would have thought that but for my disturbance they would have gone straight away up the imaginary Jacob's ladder in their

desire to be the Pilgrim which Bunyan had idealized in his book *The Pilgrim's Progress* on which that hymn was based. I knew they were all being hypocritical, and I was not wrong, because I could see Kofo Olufowokan's perfect teeth flashing behind her hymn book. Then I collided with Bisi, and her chair clattered on the floor, and Miss Davies stopped the piano, and the Head, Miss Walker lowered her glasses, and Miss Humbe, a giant of a woman, always in sneakers, stood on tip toe. She was the physical education Mistress and also the head of English and literary studies. I tumbled to the end of the row, to make for the empty seat. Why didn't they allow the empty seat to be near the door, I wondered. But then the late comer would have found life easier that way. Still it was better to be late for an Assembly than not to come at all. Our dear Mrs O would know and would then have a 'word' with the sinner. I would rather disturb the whole school than suffer Mrs O's 'word'. It was Hamlet who boasted that he was going to speak daggers, but our Mrs O's word was sharper than daggers. I know this is difficult to imagine, but that was how we had been conditioned to feel.

The morning service went on, after Miss Davies had put her glasses back on and straightened her already stiff shoulders and had tossed her head back. We soon knelt in prayer and finished the morning assembly by singing the school hymn,

Lord grant us like the watching five,
To wait thy coming and to strive,
Each one her lamp to trim...

I felt this hymn was having a go at me. I was the foolish virgin who did not trim her lamp and was too late and unprepared for the Wedding feast. Some people said this story of the foolish virgins in the bible was symbolic, some of us believed it was real. I remember during one of my school holidays I was explaining the meaning of our school hymn to a distant cousin in Ibuza. She was at school too, but not in a 'big school' like mine. At the mention of the virgin she gasped. 'You mean Jesus Christ refused women, even though they were virgins, simply because they did not trim their stupid lamps?' she asked.

'Not just their lamps, Josephine, they were not ready for the wedding' I began.

'I wish I was there. I can trim and fill twenty million lamps if that is all it will take to be a good woman. Not like this rotten place. You have to be a virgin, a virgin all the time.'

I looked at her, too scared to say a word. We were coming to that age where we were not allowed to say everything that came into our heads. But I suspected that my cousin, Jo would be in a big trouble on her wedding night. She did not say it, she did not need to. And as if to make me sorrier for her she said, 'One can kill a fowl and pour it on the white cloth you use on your first night with your husband.'

I shook my head. I did not know, but went on, 'My mother said that any other blood would go pale before morning. But the real thing would always be red.'

After an uncomfortable silence, Jo said, 'I can trim lamps. I think Christianity is better. Think of all the beatings and humiliations one would have to go through otherwise. Trimming lamps is easier.'

Jo and I were clitorised on the same day, when we were eight, because we belong to the same age group; yet she was saying this.

I was asking about her the other day, twenty years after this conversation. And I was told she was a nun. Still a nun, when I was writing this. Jo, with the narrow face as the Europeans used to describe her, went into a nunnery because she probably thought God would accept girls who by mistake or curiosity or sheer ignorance had become rather adventurous. The fact that it needs two people to experience such an adventure but it was the girl who had to be penalized, makes one think sometimes. But that was what they said clitorisation was supposed to prevent one from doing. I am quite sure I don't know much about that, but if with all that I managed to have five children in five years and all before I was twenty five, imagine what I would have been if I did not have it done. Or is the tradition sheer male brutality? Especially as it was, and still is done in the open, with no anaesthesia of any kind? But I am glad to say all this is slowly dying out. Too slowly perhaps.

Like my cousin Jo, I was taking the school song literally.

But one thing that still surprises me about the discipline of my early school days was our maturity in human relations. No girl reproached you afterwards for disturbing the assembly, not to your face anyway. But the thought of it would die with you. Girls realized even then that that was enough punishment. And that it could happen to them as well. But that they did understand why this kept happening to me, was so humane of them. Or maybe the few people who took the trouble to tell me that I was doing something wrong noticed that I was not confident enough to take any kind of criticism nicely. I still, even now, don't know how people do it. But now in my thirties I've mastered a beautiful art in which I laugh at myself first, so that when criticisms come, they lose their sharpness and

pain. Then I had not mastered the art of masking my emotion. So out of pity, my class-mates would rather not say a word. And because of this, I was ignorant of so many things which the other girls knew and could get away with.

My greatest escape was into literature. I remember clearly the first English story I read by myself. It was Hansel and Gretel, who walked hand in hand and were lost in their bed of flowers in a European wood, I read this book several times in my Primary school, and I knew most of the words by heart. I used to imagine myself lost like that in the bush, so that my relatives with whom I was living at the time would be kinder to me and stop beating me for the slightest thing I did; so that my mother would come and stay with my younger brother and I, like we used to do before our father died; so that my mother would love me so much that she would leave her new native husband, who only had to inherit her and not marry her the way my dead father did. Then the second story was that of 'Snow White', I used to cry my eyes out with those seven dwarfs. And during the school holidays we used to go home to Ibuza. There I virtually drank in all the old ladies' stories in the village.

Later, towards the end of my school days, my work started to suffer. Because the teachers were always intruding into my thoughts, even in the class room. I would build a story in which I was the heroine, and in which I always had enough to eat, and in which I always had a nice bed and not the bug-ridden plank we slept on at Mrs D's boarding house. They used to be such beautiful stories. Thank goodness, I never spoke most of them out. Knowing what I now know of Psychology, I would probably have been certified.

One of the reasons for my imagining my thoughts all by myself happened on the day this story started. After the Assembly, one of the lessons that morning was English Literature. I always guessed Miss Humble did not like me. There was nothing to like about me, anyway. I was always too serious looking, with formidable glasses, and not particularly clean or clever. My class work was steadily going down, and this was making life more difficult. The position was so circular. It was like this. I was afraid of leaving school, it was not a beautiful life but at least it was safe, it was reliable. Because of this fear, I started to dream of another beautiful world, but the funniest thing about this world was that I was always the mother of many children. And the more I wallowed in my dreams, to the extent even of bringing them into the class room, the more my work suffered, and the greater my fear. Because if one was on scholarship and failed an exam, the scholarship would be taken from

that person. I made a good grade in the end, but to achieve this, I drove myself to the brink almost, knowing that it was either that or to die.

Anyway, the tall and broad Miss Humble never liked me. Because I wanted her to like me like she did my friend Kehinde Lawal I used to really try in her literature lesson. And her subject was my best anyway. I used to dream most in Mrs Osho's Maths lesson, especially when she came to the black board with her horrible looking board compass. Girls who were clever in her Maths class said she was good. But I was not good in her subject. Much much later, how I wished she was with me when I had to take Social Statistics when I was reading for my degree in Sociology.

Anyway, Miss Humble did not like me and that was that. And if she did not like me, she had more excuse after my shameful behaviour in the Assembly that morning. She went on reading Coleridge's 'Christabel' and was going

Tu - whit! - Tu - whool
And hark, again! the crowing cock,
How drowsily it crew.

My mouth was agape in wonder. I was no longer looking at a young English teacher with an M.A. in English from Oxford, but I was back in the village land of my ancestors. I was listening to the voice of my father's little mother, with her big head covered in white woolly curls, with saliva trickling down the corner of her mouth, with her face sweating and shining in the sweat, and me sitting by her feet, and the Ukwa tree giving us an illusive shade from the bright moon, and the children, the young ones who could not sit still for stories playing Ogbe. I was there in Ībuza, in Umuezeokolo, in Odanta, where all my people came from. I was there in that place and did not hear the young English woman born in the Lake District and trained at Oxford, calling me, calling me. Suddenly somebody nudged me. Then Miss Humble's voice came through. Sharp. Angry.

'Florence! Florence! what are you going to be when you grow up?'

'A writer,' I replied.

Silence.

She stretched herself, standing on her toes as if she was determined to reach the ceiling, and pointed stiffly at me. Then she said in a hoarse low voice, her protruding teeth looking as if they were going to fall out and

the white hanky she tied around her watch with the masculine band twitching, 'Pride goes before a fall!'

I was now fully awake. 'I said I would like to be a writer,' I began again, just in case she did not hear me at first.

'Go out, out, and straight to the chapel. Go there and pray, for God to forgive you.'

'Eh?' I said.

'And take a bad Mark!'

I then knew this was serious. I was by the door, ready to run for it. Bad marks were added up and shown in one's school report. Some girls even said they put them in one's leaving school testimonial. But nonetheless I wanted to find out what I had exactly done to warrant this untoward punishment. I hesitated just for a split second, my eyes not leaving her face, as she stood there in her ramrod erectness, her hand stretched straight like a poker. I saw her mouth making the shape of another 'bad Mark'. It was then that I ran, past the large glass window of our class room that faced the verandah in the front part of the school. I did not stop until I was sure Miss Humble could see me no longer. Then I started to walk slowly up the stairs towards the chapel that was on the first floor of our large E-shaped school.

My mind was at first blank, with only Miss Humble's voice ringing in my ears. The voice of authority. The voice one had been taught to associate with correctness. The voice one had never questioned. The voice that had simply to be obeyed. Then as I neared the door of the chapel, my own voice, little and at first insecure, started to filter in. 'What are you going to tell God, eh? What Florence are you going to tell Him, when you go inside there to ask His forgiveness. Are you going to say, "Please dear God, don't make me a writer" ... and then at the same time say, 'But dear God, I so wish to be a writer, a story teller like our old mothers at home in Ibuza. But unlike them, I would not have to sit by the moonlight because I was born in an age of electricity, and would not have to tell my story with my back leaning against the Ukwa tree, because now I have learnt to use a new tool for the same art. Now I have learnt a new language, the language of Miss Humble and the rest of them. So where is the sin in that?''

My voice suddenly grew louder, bolder, and it covered up the voice of Miss Humble. I reached the chapel door, and with my head up, I walked past it. God had more important things to do than punish me for saying my dream aloud. Not only did I not go into that chapel to pray, I did not call the bad mark either. I thought about that for many a night, and I

came to the conclusion that Miss Humble probably felt that her language was too pure for the likes of me to want to use it to express myself. Hence to her it was pride to say what I said. But why did she take the trouble to leave her island home and come and teach it to us in the first place? This was one example of the duplicity and near hypocrisy which at that age used to make my head ache so much whenever I wanted to puzzle things out.

But on one point she got me. And that was ordering me out of the class. That kind of action was to us like that meted out to a leper, being excommunicated for just simply being a leper.

I laughed very much when I remembered this scene twenty years later when I was in London, teaching English to English children, and had to order a very difficult and disturbing sixteen-year-old Cockney boy out of the class. I was still new as a teacher. Instead of being ashamed and sorry, the boy was happy and became noisier and started to make faces at the rest of the class through the window. He did not stop at this, but started to bang things against the wall and this brought the school head. I saw him talk to the boy, and with his face purple with anger he asked me in front of the class what I thought I was doing, ordering a boy out of the class. I tried to explain, but the head refused to understand. He made it perfectly clear that in schools like his, the children rule, and teachers have to obey. If you send a child out of the class, you have given him the freedom to go out and vandalise the school, the streets, do all sorts of things. How did those early teachers manage to put such values into us? I soon learnt the ropes in that school. England is a welfare State, one does not need too much education to survive. Nigeria was then and is still now a capitalist state, where you have to work at anything you do to survive. No dole money, no unemployment benefit, and education is highly rewarded. The gap between the rich and the non-rich is very wide. It is nice to be able to travel and sometimes live away from one's native land. I would not be able to know that but for the fact that I later lived in England for eighteen years.

Anyway, as I was saying, I did not call in my bad mark on the following Friday as one was supposed to do, because I felt that I had done nothing wrong. But for the rest of my school career I made sure never to anger a teacher so much as to send me out of the class. So that when I left school, my head, Miss Walker, said in my testimonial that I was mild, pleasant and placid. And she was sure I would do well in anything I set my heart on. Well she was wrong, about the latter. About the former

attributes, I would have been something else, the opposite in fact, if I was only sure of how people would take my outbursts.

I set my mind on making a successful marriage. They taught us at Girls' High School that prayers and devotion could move mountains. Well it did not work out for me that way. And as my marriage neared its end, and I was trying so much to make it work, to make him proud of me, I did again what I did to Miss Humble. That seemed to be my last card in every bad situation. But this time I did not just say it, I actually wrote it down to prove to him that I was something. He got angry and burnt my first manuscript. And I felt the native, bush independent woman in me come to the fore. I packed my dripping four siblings and pregnant self and faced the streets of London. The perseverance which one had learnt to go through during one's school days, coupled with reading so many novels and the capability of being able to think and dream, taught me what everybody knows but only sometimes remembers, namely that no situation is permanent. Those babies with wet nappies dangling between their legs are now grown-up young men and women, battling for University places. Children do become adults. And I said to myself that one day, just one day, when they become adults and I am in my forties, then I would be so confident that I would not have to ask anybody's opinion, then I would write. I would then not need Miss Humble to give me a nice smile and say 'good girl, keep it up', neither would I need a husband to say, 'but you are such a clever wife, do keep it up, and keep writing'.

As it came about, I started to write when I was still in my mid-twenties, but still as insecure as ever. And somehow I survived, just, my head above water, all those years in England. It reads like a story, even to me, so if it reads like that to you, I won't blame you at all. Because sometimes I don't believe some of the things that happened to me. It is very true that some facts can be stranger than fiction.

Buchi Emecheta's autobiographical account will be serialized in the next two issues of *Kunapipi*.