

Utopian and Dystopian cycle in Buchi Emecheta's

The Rape of Shavi

K.Parameswari

Reg.No:18121274012015

St.John's College

Palayamkottai

and

Dr.Beneson Thilagar Christadoss

Associate Professor in English

St.John's College

Palayamkottai

This research paper is to analyse the utopian and dystopian world of depiction in Buchi Emecheta's *The Rape of Shavi* published in 1983. Shavi is an imaginary place situated on the edge of the African Sahara. The paper focuses on the similarities and differences between Thomas More's *Utopia* and Buchi Emecheta's *Shavi*. *Utopia* is an ideal world and perfect society where everyone lives in harmony and peace. Everything is done for the good of the citizens. Dystopian is just opposite to utopia. In this no one lives peacefully and they suffer from poverty and diseases. There is little hope for living. The utopian world of Shavians is brought back after tasting the civilization of the albinos and after entering into the dystopian. Finally the Shavians understood the consequences of weapon and blood of the dystopian world and return to the ancestors' practice of the utopian Shavi. The Shavians decided that not to allow Shavi to be raped once again.

Utopia and dystopia are genres of speculative fiction that explore social and political structures. Utopian fiction portrays the setting that agrees with the author's ethos, having various attributes of another reality intended to appeal to readers. Dystopian fiction is the opposite: the portrayal of a setting that completely disagrees with the author's ethos.

The word utopia was first used in direct context by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 work *Utopia*. The word utopia resembles both the Greek words no place, outopos, and good place, eutopos. In his Latin version book, Thomas More sets out a vision of an ideal society. As the title suggests, the work presents an ambiguous and ironic projection of the ideal state.

In English, Utopia is pronounced exactly as Eutopia meaning good place contains the prefix eu-, good. This is something that More himself addresses in an addendum to his book "Wherefore not Utopie, but rather rightly my name is Eutopie, a place of felicitie". More's book imagines a complex, self-contained community set on an island, in which people share a common culture and way of life.

According to Thomas More, the island of Utopia is described in Book II as:

The island of Utopia is in the middle two hundred miles broad, and holds almost at the same breadth over a great part of it, but it grows narrower towards both ends. Its figure is not unlike a crescent. Between its horns the sea comes in eleven miles broad, and spreads itself into a great bay, which is environed with land to the compass of about five hundred miles, and is well secured from winds. In this bay there is no great current; the whole coast is, as it were, one continued harbour, which gives all that live in the island great convenience for mutual commerce. But the entry into the bay, occasioned by rocks on the one hand and shallows on the other, is very dangerous. In the middle of it there is one single rock which appears above water, and may, therefore, easily be avoided; and on the top of it there is a tower, in which a garrison is kept; the other rocks lie under water, and are very dangerous. The channel is known only to the natives; so that if any stranger should enter into the bay without one of their pilots he would run great danger of shipwreck. For even they themselves could not pass it safe if some marks that are on the coast did not direct their way; and if these should be but a little shifted, any fleet that might come against them, how great so ever it were, would be certainly lost. On the other side of the island there are likewise many harbours; and the coast is so fortified, both by nature and art, that a small number of men can hinder the descent of a great army. But they report (and there remains good marks of it to make it credible) that this was no island at first, but a part of the continent. Utopus, that conquered it (whose name it still carries, for Abraxa was its first name), brought the rude and uncivilised inhabitants into such a good government, and to that measure of politeness, that they now far excel all the rest of mankind. Having soon subdued them, he designed to separate them from the continent, and to bring the sea quite round them. To accomplish this he ordered a deep channel to be dug, fifteen miles long; and that the natives might not think he treated them like slaves, he not only forced the inhabitants, but also his own soldiers, to labour in carrying it on. As he set a vast number of men to work, he, beyond all men's expectations, brought it to a speedy conclusion. And his neighbours, who at first laughed at the folly of the undertaking, no sooner saw it brought to perfection than they were struck with admiration and terror. There are fifty-four cities in the island, all large and well built, the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same .(83-84)

The literary term utopia denotes an illusionary place that projects the notion of a perfect society to the reader. Here, the perfect society refers to ideal conditions

achieved within the material world, as opposed to the expected idealism of after life in Christianity or other religions. Further, the citizens presiding in such utopias are bearers of a perfect moral code, or at the least, every violator of the moral code is harshly punished. A utopian society is one where all social evils have been cured.

An earlier example of a Utopian work from classical antiquity is Plato's *The Republic*, in which he outlines what he sees as the ideal society and its political system. Later examples can be seen in Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* and Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, which uses an anagram of "nowhere" as its title.

Utopia is a tool for exposing the flaws prevalent within an existing political structure. Further, the tool has been widely employed by writers who intended to make an impact on the consciences of readers. The writer uses utopia in order to portray a scenic picture in the eyes of the reader, in an attempt to make him fully appreciate the various diverging factors contributing towards the failings of the existing society. It deals with constructing a standard socio political society in the reader's mind, in order to criticize the prevalent legal norms.

In *The Rape of Shavi*, Emecheta proposes a resurrection of some indigenous customs and a revalorization of indigenous culture and tradition. In this allegorical novel set in the mythical sub-Sahara kingdom of Shavi, Emecheta deviates from her usual female- character -centred novels and writes expansively about culture and civilization.

In *The Rape of Shavi* the utopian Shavi is described as:

Shavi, Koku and about thirty other grown-ups, and many children, walked a little each day, eating what they could find and killing animals for meat. Finally they came to a place, where the land was so flat, they could see for a long, long way ahead, where flowers were smaller but brighter and there was dryness in the wind. Here they found it so cold they couldn't trek at night, as they used to. A further four days journey brought them to the Ogene lakes. They washed and made sacrifices, not with humans like Kokuma, but with birds. And because their prayers heard and the lakes produced enough to feed them, birds became the object of worship of the people, who chose the name of Shavi for their new settlement. (24)

The Shavians lived peacefully with the council of elders leading by the "Slow one" (1) King Patayon. They are consulting the Goddess River Ogene for the deeds; they are going to do through the priest. After, the thunder from the bird of fire

brought changes in their peace. This is predicted by the king in the beginning of the novel itself.

King Patayon gathered his loose body cloth and his wobbly body and ran. He ran in among the egbo trees, the tall cacti, past the palace walls, towards the biggest of the three lakes. There he knelt, his face distorted with fear as he prayerfully addressed the lake. What is this monster that has descended on Shavi, Mother Ogene and all you goddesses of the lakes? What, or who are they, in that bird of fire? I will give Shoshovi a cow. I will, but please, you ageless mothers, don't terrify your children so, went on king Patayon. (10)

"Things will never be the same again," Patayon mouthed his thoughts aloud. (11)

A dystopia is a society characterized by a focus on that which is contrary to the author's ethos, such as mass poverty, public mistrust and suspicion, a police state or oppression. Most authors of dystopian fiction explore at least one reason why things are that way, often as an analogy for similar issues in the real world. Dystopian literature is used to provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable. Some dystopias claim to be utopias. Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* can be seen as a dystopia because of the way sick people are punished as criminals while thieves are cured in hospitals, which the inhabitants of Erewhon see as natural and right, i.e. utopian as mocked in Voltaire's *Candide*.

In Buchi's *Shavi* the dystopian cycle is explained through Iyalode's words as

As they came near the lake the strong smell of rotting flesh hit them."There they are meeting and making predictions as to how many camels you will bring us".

"Who killed the elders?" Viyon asked with gritted teeth.

"The drought killed many, and the people of Ongar killed the rest by taunting them and telling them of your 'desert conquests'. This killed all of the thinking men. You know that with them shame kills very fast. The talking men are still around, living and hiding behind the Shavi hills. You took all the men of action with you so we have very few men left." (176)

Slavery is a feature of Utopian life and it is reported that every household has two slaves. The slaves are either from other countries or are the Utopian criminals.

These criminals are weighed down with chains made out of gold. Slaves are periodically released for good behaviour.

In *The Rape of Shavi*, slavery is present in the treatment of people and their priorities.

Shavians ancestors are enslaved by several kings called the kokuma, somewhere over a hundred and ten days journey from Shavi. Whenever there was any sacrifice to be made, the king would send for a son daughter of the group of people living in a place Ogbe Asaba. The poor victim would be killed, and, as this had always been the custom, it never occurred to anyone to question it. They worked for the king without any kind of payment, and were encouraged to breed simply for sacrificial purposes. Their unthinking way of life went on until the boy Shavi was born, to a young girl who, legend claimed, was once king's sweetheart. The king wouldn't marry her, not even to make her one of the lowest queens, because she came from Ogbe Asaba.(18)

Utopians do not like to engage in war. If they feel countries friendly to them have been wronged, they will send military aid, but they try to capture, rather than kill, enemies. They are upset if they achieve victory through bloodshed. The main purpose of war is to achieve that which, if they had achieved already, they would not have gone to war over.

The voice of the people of Shavi is the voice of Ogene. People of Shavi were like "Live and let live" (45). They won't go for war and disputes with anyone within their homeland or with their neighbouring places like Ongar, Kano, Blimer and Koo. But the situation changes when Asogba became a civilized inhuman and starts using his western weapons. This made the Shavians force into a dystopian world of poverty and too much of bloodshed in the sacred peaceful land.

In Voltaire's *Candide* the ironical character of the old woman and her tragic life is an example of dystopian element of the young princess became the wanderer and her sexual assaults as a slave.

I had not always bleared eyes and red eyelids; neither did my nose always touch my chin; nor was I always a servant. I am the daughter of Pope Urban X and of the Princess of Palestrina. Until the age of fourteen, I was brought up in a palace, to which all the castles of your German barons would scarcely have served for stables; and one of my robes was worth more than all the magnificence of Westphalia. As I grew up I improved in beauty, wit, and every graceful accomplishment, in the midst of pleasures, hopes, and respectful homage. Already I inspired love. My throat was formed, and such a

throat! white, firm, and shaped like that of the Venus of Medici; and what eyes! what eyelids! What black eyebrows! such flames darted from my dark pupils that they eclipsed the scintillation of the stars--as I was told by the poets in our part of the world. My waiting women, when dressing and undressing

me, used to fall into an ecstasy, whether they viewed me before or behind; how glad would the gentlemen have been to perform that office for them!

I need not tell _you_ how great a hardship it was for a young princess and her mother to be made slaves and carried to Morocco. You may easily imagine all we had to suffer on board the pirate vessel. My mother was still very handsome; our maids of honour, and even our waiting women, had more charms than are to be found in all Africa. As for myself, I was ravishing, was exquisite, grace itself, and I was a virgin! I did not remain so long; this flower, which had been reserved for the handsome Prince of Massa Carara, was plucked by the corsair captain. He was an abominable Negro, and yet believed that he did me a great deal of honour. Certainly the Princess of Palestrina and myself must have been very strong to go through all that we experienced until our arrival at Morocco. (42)

In *The Rape of Shavi*, after realising the mistake of Asogba the Shavians decided to live the same life of their ancestors. Again Shavi became the utopian place with elder council members. Asogba asked his cousin as:

"Viyon, what exactly is civilisation?"

"I don't know what it is, but we have it, the best of it, and maybe the albino people have theirs too. It is difficult to say." (178)

Emecheta writes about a world lost and a world becoming, a world and a world indestructible. The Africa of Emecheta's novels is a continent reeling in two times: Western diachronicity and traditional African synchronicity. In *The Rape of Shavi*, Emecheta chronicles the personal dilemma of the African confronted and lured by Western time and Western culture. The allure of Western time conquers the slaves and alters their perceptions of time and culture.

Although the title suggests this is another novel about women, Shavi represents all Africans, male and female, who suffer abuse and outrage -rape -at the hands of white Westerners. Emecheta's focus on a people rather than a character permits her to explore consciousness rather than individual psyche. It offers her the opportunity to move away from the traditional novel concerned with the consolidation of character and instead to envisage an expanding outward and inward creative significance for the novel. "Remember what the Queen Mother said

to you the night we returned. She said that Shavi is the Mother of us all. She has been raped once, and we must never allow her to be raped again". (178)

Works Cited

Barthelemy, Anthony. "Western Time, African Lives: Time in The Novels of Buchi Emecheta." *Callaloo*, no. 40, 1989, pp. 559-574. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2931303.

Booker, Keith M. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. ISBN 9780313290923

Emecheta, Buchi. *The Rape of Shavi*. New York: MGeorge Braziller, Inc., 1983

More, Thomas (2002). George M. Logan; Robert M. Adams; Raymond Geuss; Quentin Skinner (Eds.). *Utopia* (Revised ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0-521-81925-3.

Harris, Wilson. *Tradition, the writer and society*. London: New Began Books, 1967. "Apocalyptic Literature". Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd. 1993.

<http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/wells/blog.htm>

<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=felicity>
