RAPE OF SHAVI

Emecheta’s seventh novel, THE RAPE OF SHAVI published in 1983, is one more feminist fable from this African woman writer whose major concern and preoccupation is woman, especially African woman who is struggling to carve out space for herself as a vibrant, independent, autonomous human entity, be it in Africa where she has her native roots or transplanted, abroad. Society, in the East or the West, predominantly patriarchal, has always tended to relegate woman to a secondary and subservient position. Woman is a second class citizen every where inspite of the fact that she is the creatrix, progenitor and protectress and has the innate gifts of patience, perseverance; and with equanimity, can take the severely harsh bludgeonings of adverse fate. She may bend under the impact of misfortunes, but she would not cringe, creep and crawl. Emecheta’s vision of a brave new woman who asserts herself and helps life to go on is on display again in The Rape of Shavi.

It is significant that The Rape of Shavi comes as a kind of sequel to Destination Biafra. Biafra, as was visualised, was to be an ideal, utopian, unitary state where all its people live in harmony and peace and prosper. It was a stupendous task, for Nigerians are of different ethnic backgrounds. To fuse into this multi-lingual, multi-religious people into one Nation and persuade them to outgrow their narrow, parochial tribal loyalties is foredoomed to flounder and fall. The dream gets shattered. Tribal loyalties assert themselves and war breaks out. The fragile political framework comes crashing down. Looting, arson and indiscriminate genocide are the order of the day. In this process, it is the women who suffer most. Women pay the penalty for
the wars undertaken by men. Men die, women lose their husbands and sons, their so
called erstwhile “owners”, bread-winners and protectors. The widowed and orphaned
women, young and old, have the burden of caring for the children left behind. They
are exposed to the atrocious and inhuman cruelties inflicted on them by the rapacious
enemy on the rampage. Even their personal honour is not safe. They become victims
of brutal rape. No woman is spared. Even old women like Debbie’s mother and the
old Nuns fall prey to the monstrous bestiality of the army. Emecheta has offered a
vivid, videographic portrait of such despicable events in her Destination Biafra.
But women always rise. Innate strength of character, instinct for survival, pragmatic
outlook on life help women to rebuild their splintered lives. The Mother triumphs.
Woman as mother triumphs. They live and help others to come to terms with life and
live. It is this brave, new African Woman in such characters like Debbie, Uzomo,
Modke that Emecheta has created. A woman in the ditch has to exert herself, hold
her head above water and fight her way back and stand on her own, asserting her
autonomy.

Emecheta has worked out a similar theme here in her The Rape of Shavi, set
in a different locale, and not in the common fictional mode of a novel. Her The Rape
of Shavi has the dimensions of a utopian fable. The Rape theme is recurrent in the
fictional canon of Emecheta. In the African tribal tradition, the most treasured
possession of a girl is her virginity. Ritual celebration is a must for a girl coming of
age, of attaining puberty. It is a heinous crime if one were to outrage a girl’s modesty.
In Emecheta’s Bride Price Akunna is kidnapped and is being readied for being
“entered into” and claimed as his bride by Okoboshi which tribal custom permits.
She resists and through a clever ruse manages to escape the ignominy, being rescued by her lover Chike. Sex even with an unwilling partner, like one's own wife, is an act of sin. As is shown by Emecheta in her novel Second Class Citizen and Gwendolen, a later work of Emecheta, also works out this theme. Rape of any kind, singes and traumatizes the woman's psyche. A woman may forgive the offender but can never forget the offence.

Emecheta locates her Shavi somewhere on the fringes of the vast Saharan desert in Africa. It is an oasis in the desert shielded all around by hills, a sanctuary offering immediate protection to the persecuted band of men and women and children who had trekked for over a hundred days stopping only to rest when the sun got too high. The group was led by Shavi, the natural son of king Kokuma. Kokuma would never marry Shavi's mother, for she was a slave girl from Ogbe Asaba the slave village. He was brought up as a slave but certain special privileges were conferred on him by the king. Shavi grew up and learnt his true identity from his mother. Shavi was determined to get his own back one day.

Presently, the spirit of freedom in Shavi, which came to him through the blood of the kings that ran in his veins, rose up.¹

Shavi leads his people to demand freedom from their centuries old bondage from the Kokuma. It was denied. Ransom offered was returned. The eldest son of Koku from Ogbe Asaba is sacrificed. The king sends for Shavi and his two sons. The people knew what it meant. They left the village that very night. Freedom is worth fighting

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for and dying for if need be. Their relentless march took them more than a hundred days. Hunger, thirst, chasing enemy, heat and dust, nothing could deter them in their onward march in search of a haven, an Emmanuel's land, of hope, of peace, of freedom and prosperity. Their long march was not in vain. It brought them to the Ogene lakes.

As Emecheta describes the scene,

They washed and made sacrifices, not with humans like Kokuma, but with birds. And because their prayers were heard and the lakes produced enough to feed them, birds became the object of worship of the people.  

They named the new settlement Shavi, after their leader who led them out of bondage into freedom. Living in peace, and threatened by no overlording master who demanded human sacrifices, the Shavians increased and multiplied.

Today, there were over twenty thousand of them.

Shavi is now ruled by King Patayon, a Lineal descendent of Shavi, popularly acclaimed with the sobriquet, the Slow One. A popular, peaceful democracy, presided over by a king, Shavi is self-supporting and self-sufficient. It is an isolated garden of Eden with its complement of able-bodied and hard working men and women, the King and the Queen-Mother, its band of kriors, official chroniclers and singers of the glory of Shavi, the priest and his assistant, a priestess, whose duties are to pray, organize the rituals of worship and commune with the presiding deity, the Goddess of the Lake, Ogene and invoke her blessings and protection. Human sacrifices are a thing of the
past. They vowed never to kill. They would let the offenders realize their mistakes and pine in grief. It is a matter of faith with them that shame kills sinners faster than any corporal punishment could.

The ancestors of the present day Shavians taught them what it was to be enslaved. In Shavi, even a child “was free to tell the king where it was that the king had gone wrong”.

He was heard and no offence was taken. The kings suffered no loss of face or dent in their dignity heeding to the voice of the open council. They still retained their respectability. This idyl lasted for generations “until the day when the silver bird blundered in upon them, shattering the tranquil atmosphere”. There is smoke and fire in the bird’s tail and birds are sacred to Ogene, the Goddess they worship. It is ominous, a portent of evils to descend upon Shavi. They behold it in superstitious dread.

Women, particularly, mothers are the principal focal point of the entire fable. With her characteristically superb narrative skill and her sure eye for its dramatic impact, Emecheta has the aeroplane come crashing down near the palace grounds. The west intrudes into the East. The thundering crash signals the shattering of the peace that prevailed for so long. The rape of Shavi is inaugurated. The King’s council is on, and Shoshovi; the Queen-mother had made bold to lodge a public complaint against her husband, king Payaton. Shavi had survived a severe drought and is celebrating it. The king is set to take a new wife on the occasion, as is customary.

4. Ibid. P. 3.
5. Ibid. P. 24.
Tradition sanctions such a practice, but he should have first consulted and obtained the consent of his first five, the Queen-Mother, the mother of the future king of Shavi. The custom ordains that he should offer her a compensatory gift, a cow. She felt slighted and hence the summoning of the King’s council to lodge her protest. Mothers are considered sisters of Ogene, the Goddess of their water resources. An offence against a woman, is an offence against the Goddess. It is a grave matter and decisions are taken in communal fashion, with direct access to the king. Though the patron deity of the Shavians is Ogene, women are still treated as second class citizens. They are still marginal figures. Shoshovi’s address to the council underscores this truth. She begins,

My owners, ... I invited you to the palace for a purpose. You all know what they say, that women are the softness on which our men recline. But sometimes that softness has gently to give a reminder to our men and our owners. ... Ogene our Goddess says that we are all responsible for each other, and forbids that we should let the communal spirit die and go back to the way our people were forced to live in Ogbe Asaba.  

Shoshovi enters the council wearing around her neck the close-fitting “ebulu” neck-band, a slave-collar that even a queen has to wear until the day she dies. The patriarchal order of Shavian society is fully exposed. The Queen-Mother, with folded hands, begging for restitution of her rights is humiliating. Asogba, her son and heir-apparent witnesses his mother’s humiliation. The maltreatment meted out to a mother initiates a chain reaction. Shavi’s social order is disrupted. And the air around Shavi explodes and the superstitious people of Shavi stare in dread and disbelief as,

6. Ibid. P. 4, 5.
a big fast-moving cloud suddenly loomed and tore itself from the sky, one minute a cloud, the next looking like an unusually long house, another minute the shape of a bird... The bird of fire arched and crashed into Shavi, just outside the palace walls, close to one of the Ogene lakes.  

The superstitious crowd is apprehensive that Ogene is offended as women are humiliated. They wonder and question,

Has the Queen’s anger become so great that she’s summoned Ogene to send a mysterious bird of fire into Shavi?  

The encounter between the West and the East is dramatically initiated. In a daring and innovative reenactment of the Biblical myth of Noa’s Ark, Emecheta names the air craft, which has crash landed in Shavi, Newark, an ironic play on the words Noah’s Ark. It is significant that its load of immigrants comprises pairs of the species, male and female, young men and women and a couple of children - Dorf, a boy and Kisskiss, a girl. If the Ark’s resting on Ararat presaged genesis, Newark’s crash landing forebodes exodus, dispersal and the shattering breakup of the Shavian haven. During the Deluge Noah’s Ark secured life for future genesis. The passengers of the new Ark are fleeing the imminent threat of a nuclear holocaust that would wipe out all traces of life for generations to come. It is a disparate band of men and women that take shelter in this escape airship devised and built by a former Nuclear Scientist. Realising the horrors of nuclear war, Flip turns a pacifist. Finding his protests unheeded, he decides to leave and a few join him in his Newark. They leave, fly safe but unexpectedly crashland in Shavi. Dazed, bleeding and bruised they emerge out

8. Ibid. P. 9.
of the aircraft, the women crying over the two children who were severely hurt. The highly advanced, technologically superior western urban civilization is all set to put its foot on the undeveloped, primitive, Eastern rural social set up.

As this leprous white band comes into view, Anoku, the high-priest of Shavi at once proclaims them evil spirits, creatures without souls fit to be sacrificed or banished. His frenzied, hysterical cries are overruled, for men of Shavi do not kill, do not indulge in human sacrifices, as they hold life sacred and inviolable. And these appear to be human in their bearing. They are albinos and immigrants, as the Shavians themselves were immigrants here. Humanitarian concern triumphs and the occupants of the crashed craft are cautiously led into the King’s compound and are lodged in the best of the guest houses. Men have done their duty and the women of Shavi take over. Shoshovi, the Queen-Mother leads the Shavian female band. Ayoku, the future Queen and Queen-Mother of Shavi is part of this group. All human are of one family. Shavians are not racists. They are humanists to the care.

Men have carried out their rescue operation and women are now in charge of the healing, restoring mission. It is a woman’s natural right. A woman in Shavi is still a slave, but she serves better than a man. Woman is mother or mother-to-be. “Women are the softness on which .... men recline”. Humanity asserts itself and the best of hospitality that Shavi can offer is lavished on the new immigrants. Shoshovi restores Kisskiss, Andria’s daughter, to a state of normal health by rubbing her body with some native herbal oils and soothing talk. The educated western woman Andria, and Ista, a trained gynecologist, were at first outraged at the crude medication but were
relieved to find the girl "walking and talking soon". The shock of the plane's crash could have damaged the girl's brain. A primitive mother's healing touch and soothing talk do the trick and help her recovery. The sophisticated western feminism is in direct confrontation with the native, simple, plain, ego-less feminism of the East. The western woman begins to learn.

Flip, Mendoza and Ronje constitute the male group. Flip is the first to make the necessary adjustments and become friendly with the Shavians. Mendoza, is guarded and watchful and Ronje is positively hostile, supercilious in his bearing, snobbish in his behaviour and racist in his conduct. He is a frustrated man as he suffered in his personal life when his wife left him for a black man. This galling wound in his psyche embitters him for life and he takes it out on the blacks. The Shavians are black and hence are fit only to be lorded over.

They cannot understand that Shavian democracy leaves no scope for the growth of a servant class. Here people have a self-supporting economy. Each one works for himself and for the community. Even the Queen-Mother has to work. They expect the European immigrants to follow suit soon after their recovery from the ill-effects of their crash-landing. Flip is to help in the cattle rearing, Mendoza and Ronje in the farmwork and the women are to learn the art of keeping their allotted quarters and grounds neat and tidy and cook their own food. The Shavians are hospitable, but they expect their visitors to serve themselves and not be dependent like slaves. Children are the first to adapt themselves. Andria and Ista who follow suit. Flip, the leader figure among men, finds it useful and helpful to work with his Shavian hosts. Mendoza
nd Ronje are not easily reconciled to their suddenly changed status as farm hands.

Ronje bursts out,

I think they want to make slaves out of us. When a white man lands in a place like this, he is always superior. He makes the native his servant, not the other way round. 9

Mendoza adds,

When I discover a new part of the earth, instead of my lording it over them, they make me a labourer. 10

Flip’s sober and reasoned response is that they should bend and follow for, “we don’t want trouble”. There is still hope as Newark is not damaged beyond repair. The engine could be patched up and they could fly away.

The Shavians pair off Mendoza and Ista and Flip and Andria and Ronje is the only white left out without a wife. Ronje eyes Ayoko and considers her, in his supercilious way, as an easy prey to expend his lust. As he sees it, these Shavian women, who are serving them, are slaves, sub-human strata of the Shavian society. He thinks that “Here women are used as chattels” and as one hailing from a superior civilization he is duty-bound to emancipate them from slavery. He is repeatedly warned not to precipitate matters and endanger the lives of his fellow whites. Flip has cautioned him, “Look out, old chap, she’s only a child”. 11 Ayoko’s innate friendliness and innocent smiles further excite the carnal cravings of this cynic, Ronje. He comes

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10. Ibid. P. 88.
11. Ibid. P. 42.
upon her while she is having her bath. The rape of Shavi has begun as Emecheta describes,

Ronje fell on her, and in less than ten minutes, took from the future Queen of Shavi what the whole of Shavi stood for. To him, the Shavians were savages and Ayoko was just a servant girl. Though she fought, cried and begged, her pleading was gibberish to him, her resistance enhanced the vengeance he was taking on Shona.¹²

Shona was his wife who left him for a black man. Another Philomel is ravished. Anoku the high priest of Shavi and father of Ayoko was right. These leper people were not humans,

for how could real people go out of their way to destroy the lives of those who have shown them nothing but kindness ...?¹³

In tears, and utterly bewildered, Ayoko walks straight to her mother’s house. This is a problem that is beyond her, beyond the power of her father too.

In cases of this kind, women should stick together. She went in to her mother, to cry at her breast, the breast that had given her life. ¹⁴

Women take over, and rise to meet the demands of the situation. Emecheta’s primary focus in all her works is just that. Debbie, her mother and other women in Destination Biafra are instances. Life has taught women their wisdom. Men are brave but impulsive and act in haste. If they come to know of what has happened to Ayoko, “the whole stability of Shavi will be affected”.¹⁵ Anoku’s claim that his wife Siebgo

¹². Ibid. P. 94.
¹³. Ibid. P. 95.
¹⁴. Ibid. P. 95.
¹⁵. Ibid. P. 96.
would give birth to a daughter, who according to Ogene’s prediction, would be the future Queen of Shavi would be proved false. Ogene herself would be proved false. The faith of the people is at stake and the very foundations of the Shavian society and settlement would be shaken. The king would lose his respect and position of pre-eminence and the Priest would be disowned and the albinos would get killed. They never had a case like this before. So, as Ayoko’s mother, Siegbo confides in her daughter, “we women will deal with it. It is our war”. As she reasons it out, her daughter’s honour has not been violated for

the creature, Ronje is an animal, for what human would destroy a beautiful person like you ..., Dry your tears, daughter, and go about your work with a young bright face. Leave the war to us, mothers.  

It is Ayoko today, may be tomorrow it would be Ama, the princess. Shoshovi, the Queen concurs with Siegbo: “You’re right, we must purify our land. This is our war”. Ayoko is the symbolic Mother of Shavi, if one rapes her, he rapes Shavi and Shavi reacts. “A dog that bit human must be put down”. Ronje would be put down.

Ronje feels no compunction. Ayoko is

a black girl from the desert, an object of use for any white male wanderer. He had only done what generations of his race had done before.

The women are determined to do to him what generations of women had done to such animals before. Retributive communal action is imperative. They catch him in
their animal traps, bundle him securely, drag him on, bleeding and wailing and leave
him to perish in a lonely, deserted spot. They do not beat him, or club him.

They simply left him there for the desert vultures. 21

In Shavi, they don’t kill people. Ronje had disappeared, mysteriously. The women
knew but they vowed to keep silence. A vain search is made by the palace guards.
Even Anoku fails to divine the whereabouts of Ronje. Ayoko is worried. The wire
meat and fishing nets used by the women to trap Ronje would give them away, one
day or other, for they carry some of their special tags. If that were to happen the
women would be penalized. In the dead of the night she goes to the spot where he
was left, cuts open the net and gestures to him to go as far away as possible. He had
despoiled her. It is ironic that she sets him free. Here in Shavi, they don’t kill people.
Shame would kill them faster. She is relieved and feels, “At least, his blood is not on
our hands”. Women had risen like one man and asserted their right to self-defence.
Emecheta highlights this innate gift of women to think for themselves and act to
protect their interests. Shavi might be a primitive tribal settlement, a patriarchal social
set up with women relegated to a subsidiary, secondary status and function. Women
are generally content with that but when their personal interests are at stake they rise,
they question, assert their autonomy and act swiftly, decisively and in unassailable
secrecy.

Shavi is Emecheta’s utopia. Her women display heroic courage where her

men are weak in thought, slow in action or destructively impulsive. Collective, communal female action is traceable to the traditions of the African culture. A woman creates, nurtures and defends her children. When men fail, Shavi, as mother, rises and protects.

But tradition has still its sway on the women of Shavi. They do not give it up. The modern western women, like Ista and Andria, are pitted against the staunchly traditionalist women of Shavi like Soshovi, Iyalode the priestess and Siegbo, Anoku’s wife and Ayoko’s mother. A good deal of the action of The Rape of Shavi involves these women who symbolize conflicting cultural backgrounds and traditional values. Emecheta dramatises these clashes. The enlightened western women are aghast at the way the traditionalist African Women of Shavi help deliver their children. Ista, the trained gynecologist, volunteers to help the young mother in labour for she knows that it is breach delivery and demands a caesarian section, but the Shavian women prefer the traditional way, the nature’s way of delivery. Ista rages and rants but the natives gently dismiss her and the child is successfully delivered, as Ista watches the whole drama helplessly. The primitive cultural practices are not that bad.

Here, in Shavi, virginity is sacred and in the west women carry “pills” with them. The western woman has no qualms to abort the child she carries in her womb, but her Eastern counterpart finds fulfilment and joy in motherhood. Ista aborts the child she carries of Mendoza when she returns to England, while ironically Andria who bears the child of Flip is happy to have it delivered.
The two groups are often poised on a direct confrontationist course on several issues. There is the issue of arranged marriages, a concept totally alien to the women from the west. Ayoko is meant to marry Asogba from the day of her birth. The Shavians marry off Ista and Mendoza, and Andria and Flip. Surprisingly, these sophisticated western women find themselves acquiescing to the arranged pairing. Clitoridectomy is another traditional practice. While Emecheta, herself an African, does not fully approve of it, she condones it as it happens to be centuries old traditional practice. Clitoridectomy is the test of a girl's virginity. It is a cruel practice but tradition sanctions. A girl has to be opened up for the man, her husband, to enter. To the Westerner, it is an abominable practice, but to the Easterner it is an assurance that the girl's virginity is secure and unviolated.

The Newark is repaired and successfully test-flown. To celebrate the occasion, as is customary with the Shavians, the Shavians prepare two of their girls to be married to Flip and Mendoza. Shavian men are polygamous. Flip and Mendoza are heroes and Shavi honours her heroes by presenting them new wives. To live with and make love to Andria and Ista, who are not their wedded wives, does not prick the cultural conscience of Flip and Mendoza. Polygamy is unacceptable. Asogba too is to be married on the occasion and Ayoko has to be clitorized. If a midwife were to perform the operation Ayoko’s lost virginity would be discovered and the secret of Ronje’s mysterious disappearance would be out in the open. The mothers would not let it happen. Shoshovi demands it as her right to clitorize her daughter-in-law-to-be and Iyalode, the female priestess, endorses. Men murmur their protest but Shoshovi takes and vantage of the situation and performs the operation only to discover that “Ulhang”
albino left the signature of his civilization on Ayoko. She informs her friend, Siegbo, Ayoko’s mother.

I am very very sorry. My son cannot marry your daughter, at least not yet. She has this swelling thing, look, all red and bloody. It is a strange disease. I think she must have caught it from the albino. May be your husband was right, if the albinos are carriers of disease. They must go and they must go tonight. 22

The news spreads like wild fire. The men were hysterical. There was frenzy in the air and Flip knew that they must leave and Asogba slithers over to him and urges him to go, to leave at once. The West’s gift to the East is disease and death. Ronje’s emancipatory gift to Ayoko is syphilis. Women are the victims and they are made to make the more painful contribution.

Asogba had made his secret plans to leave Shavi with the whites. He had spoken to his father and to the council. They cautioned him against it, but he represents the new, younger generation that is impatient, impulsive, defiant and reverentially disobedient. He could not be stopped. Shavians bow their heads before the inevitable. He boards the Newark and hides himself in the toilet. The albinos take off and discover that they carry the load of the Prince of Shavi.

Emecheta’s fable is working out another irony in life. Shavi broke free from bondage. She would not enslave a fellow human being. She would not kill. She is hospitable and her people are contented, peaceful, hard-working, self-supporting and independent. Dynamics of life change and the younger generation is fired by ambitions

22. Ibid. P. 138.
and the West's sudden intrusion fires their imagination further. If man in the west can make a bird and make it fly, they see no reason why they should not ape his example.machines are power, a means to establish their dominance. Asogba is impressed and his young cohorts are enthused. He lands in the west carrying back home bitter memories of personal humiliation, racial discrimination and cultural ignominy. Flip's accidental discovery of crystal diamonds comes in handy. They can be traded in exchange for machines, agricultural implements, even guns and land-ships. The periodic draughts Shavi suffers from can be overcome with more water holes dug with western machinery. The labour spent in growing food from the west which has a surplus of it with guns in their hands, the Shavians can avenge the wrong done to their ancestors generations ago by the Kokumas. Shavi rose in revolt against an authoritarian, callous and inhuman regime and led his people towards freedom, fellowship and peace. Strangely, Flip, the nuclear scientist and his fellow westerners fled the west to save themselves from an imminent nuclear holocaust. They find a safe haven but ironically the touch of the west disturbs, dislocates and in the end destroys all that Shavi stood for.

Asogba returns. New water holes are dug. Food is imposter. People slacken in their labour and relax. The young take to arms. Under the leadership of Asogba they make forays into the neighborhood settlements, plunder and pillage and kill. The west with its eye always on the natural resources of Shavi, the diamonds, exploits the situation as much and as long as it could. Asogba turns autocratic and much against the will of his father and the cautious counsel of the elderly counsellors, he undertakes an expedition of conquest. Shavi is experiencing the worst ever drought and Asogba
and his men are away on a mission of destruction, death and conquest. England no longer needs the crystals of Shavi. The supplies come to an abrupt end. Shavi shrivels, shrinks and slow death creeps on the men and women too. Asogba himself is outwitted and outmaneuvered by the hostile tribes and bearing lost the war, his arms and ammunition and decimated in the number of his co-warriors, he returns to find Shavi desolate, eerily calm and dead. Ogene’s lakes have dried up and food imports having come to a dead stop, people died of starvation and the taunting jibes of the neighbourhood tribes put them to shame. Here, in Shavi, one is frequently reminded, shame kills faster. In the words of Iyalode,

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.  

Men destroy and women create, preserve, nourish and protect. Debbie, her mother and the other women in Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* have shown what they could do under excruciating circumstances. Shavian women survive and demonstrate humanity’s instinct for life. Shoshovi, a ghost-like emaciated figure emerges to remind him of his immediate duty.

Asogba, my son, you’ll have to start all over again. You’ve been very foolish. You tampered with the peaceful life we had, and now we’ve last all over men, airway of life and our privacy. We have to start all over again ... we have at least kept all the young children alive. Your duty now, Asogba, son of Shavi, is to help us survive, ... We have been raped once, don’t let us be raped twice.

23. Ibid. P. 176.
The idyl is broken. The utopian haven of peace and plenty is shattered. In this clash of cultures and vastly different and diametrically opposed civilizations both the victim and the victor learn. The Shavians offered ready refuge to the intruders. They showed them how to look after each other, how to be responsible for one another and sheltered them in their best quest houses. In return, when Asogba went to them in their country they put him among criminals. Ogene must be teaching her children a valuable lesson. Shavians must go on living the way they used to live, surviving their droughts, cultivating their land. It might be retreat, a move towards isolationism, a withdrawal into the protective embrace of the mother. Shavi is the Mother. “She has been raped once”, and it is incumbent on Shavians never to allow her to be raped again.

Asogba is puzzled over the problem, and asks “what exactly is civilization?” 25 Emecheta is hesitant to answer this question directly. But we have a galaxy of her women characters who by the way they think and act posit a positive response to it. In times of crisis, Emecheta’s women rise as one, act and show the way. Women are the living examples of any civilization, tradition of culture.

Emecheta’s The Rape of Shavi has all the dimensions of a utopian fable. The “rape” in the tale is allegorical and pregnant in meaning. Ostensibly, there is a rape, the rape of Ayoko, the Queen-to-be of the idyllic Shavian kingdom. Rape is a heinous crime. Here rape is perpetrated on an innocent, virgin native by an alien, the albino Ronje. It is clear that Emecheta, the fabulist narrator of the tale, meant more by the term ‘rape’ in the title of her tale. It is also to be noted that The Rape of Shavi

25. Ibid. P. 178.
followed Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. Biafra, a unified, unitary pan-Nigerian Eldorado of Emecheta's dreams did not materialize. Nigeria attained its independence from the colonial masters, the British, but it is curious irony of Fate that the new masters, the blacks, themselves become the colonizers lording it over fellow blacks. The albino British were past-masters in the political art of dividing and ruling. The Nigerian euphoria had no chance of surviving for long. Corruption, nepotism, favoritism, hunger for office and power and the perks that flow out of power, clash of egos, parochial tendencies, tribal loyalties, cultural, religious and linguistic divisions engulf the state leading to internecine quarrels and civil war. Nigerians are at war with themselves. That is what the former colonial masters wanted for they have their eye on 'oil', the natural wealth of Nigeria. The exploiters have their way and hold sway. They have won and Nigeria has last. Militarism raises its ugly head and takes over the reigns of power. But divisions persist and unity appears a distant dream, almost impossible to achieve. The gruesome consequences of civil war in Nigeria are graphically presented by Emecheta in her *Destination Biafra*. Niger Republic suffered and the worst sufferers are its women. If men are foolish and kill and destroy, women as mothers, nourishers and protectors have to shoulder the burdens of life and restore order. The Debbies of Africa rise and do what they could with their limited resources. Women emerge triumphant. It is not a virulent feminist statement from Emecheta, it is a matter of her conviction. Woman must assert her autonomy. A free, educated and enlightened woman could offset the imbalances in the social set up of the dark continent of Africa. It is Emecheta's vision and she has enacted it through a galaxy of women characters in her earlier works, beginning with Ada.
Shavi is Emecheta’s ideal, pan African state. She is pragmatic enough to realise that the dynamics of life militate against statism. Life is ever in flux and flow. Change is the law of life. Utopias break up, chaotic disorder rules and is replaced by order, in time. The Rape Shavi, is an enactment of Emecheta’s dream of a new world order, but she is realist enough to own that it is too tall an order and is bound to flounder and fall. She touches upon a wide range of issues. Her tale allegorically depicts the conflict between tradition and change, the East and the West, widely different and mutually hostile values and points of view, the innocence and purity of one culture under siege from a band of clever, greedy and not totally honest intruders. The idyllic fantasy ends in abrupt explosion and Shavi is ruined. If traders, healers, educators and missionaries from the West broke the back of the tribals before, it is now the turn of the technocrat and cupid investor to break tribal customs, loyalties, social and moral values and even their traditional faiths. The peace, grace and majesty of life of the people of Shavi is destroyed. The tension between the Utopian and Dystopian aspects of the symbolic Shavian state is the subject matter of this exhaustively crafted fable. In its format, it is not a novel in the traditional European sense in which we understand the term, it is a fable, told in the typical narrative mode preferred by the East.

In a way the Shavian settlement is but a reenactment of the founding of the Ibuza, the ideal, idyllic colony Emecheta’s Ibo ancestors settled in, on the banks of the River Niger centuries ago. In the prologue to her earlier novel, The Slave Girl, Emecheta has given a picture of the founding of Ibuza under certain special circumstances. It was an Ibo prince, under order of banishment who set out on a long
trek in search of a place to settle. He was accompanied by his mother, sisters and a few others. The pioneering group set out. Wmejei, the prince was set on his journey by his father, the Oba of Isu with a parting message, blessings and a gourd of medicines to guard him. His instruction was,

Where this gourd drops to the ground, there shall be your home, and there you shall increase and multiply, and your people, your sons and daughters, shall fill the new town, and that town will grow and will always be yours.  

That was how Ibuza came into being. Emecheta is an Ibo from Ibuza. In time inroads were made into Ibuza by the Western Colonials and life had gone through a radical change. Emecheta’s roots are African, specifically Ibuza. She is an emigrant to the West and has suffered. Subjected to triple exploitation, she recalls nostalgically her happy native home. She is realist enough to acknowledge the changed reality of life both in the West and the East. In an apparent bid to recapture the lost utopia of her ancestors, her happy and peaceful ancestral home, Emecheta has spun this fabulous tale of Shavi conceding the realities wrought by time. Ibuza was raped and so is Shavi. But like the phoenix Shavi will rise, as Ibuza will, for the women are there to give it the necessary impetus. Emecheta’s women are the strength of the society. And all Emecheta’s women characters, in all her books, are heroic. She has no heroes. Her men are weak, indecisive and impulsive. Her women are the heroes of her fiction. They are strong-willed, decisive and they always win. They survive and help others to survive every calamity.