



THE DOUBLE OTHERNESS OF BLACK WOMEN: BUCHI EMECHETA'S *SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN*^{*}

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Abstract

This study examines Buchi Emecheta's motives in portraying the otherness of Igbo women through her novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1974). In this novel, Emecheta presents African women's experience of otherness within a broad context of social inequalities resulting from monolithic and unyielding societal construct in the West and in the Third World. In fact, Buchi Emecheta is a marginalized African woman writer crafting fictionalized autobiography of the experience of determined first-generation diasporic mother in *Second-Class Citizen* while living in exile far from her home of origin. By depicting the bodily and migratory experiences of the African woman and her sense of self, Emecheta reassigns previous generalizations of "Mother Africa". At this point, the figure of determined mother comes to the fore as a strategy of resistance to cultural expectations imposed on women or established customs as being stultifying to women, preventing self-development throughout the novel. Accordingly, in *Second-Class Citizen*, the mother figure is motivated by the desire both to change the community and the societal construction of citizen in London and to achieve discursive agency.

Keywords: Otherness, Migration, Gender, Identity, Colonialism.

1. Introduction

As for my survival for the past twenty years in England, from when I was a little over twenty, dragging four cold and dripping babies with me and pregnant with a fifth one- that is a miracle. And if for any reason you do not believe in miracles, please start believing, because my keeping my head above water in this indifferent society, which is probably succeeding in making me indifferent and private too, is a miracle (Emecheta, 1994, 1986: 5).

In her autobiographical work, *Head above Water* (1994, 1986), Buchi Emecheta describes her position as a "Third World" person since as an Igbo woman, she is a native of Nigeria and has spent much of her life in Britain. Born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1944 to "scantly educated parents" from Ibuza, Emecheta grew up in her home country and through a scholarship was educated at a Methodist Girls' High School in Lagos (Emecheta, 1994, 1986: 16). At sixteen, Emecheta left school and married a native young man.

After leaving high school and a two-year working experience as a librarian at the American Embassy in Lagos, Emecheta was able to save enough money to send her husband to study for a degree at London University and to leave for London with her two children two years later, in 1962 (Jagne and Parekh, 2012: 148). Once she arrived in England, Emecheta realized that the Blacks in general were not warmly welcomed. In Emecheta's words, "Our hosts in our new country simply refused to see beyond the surface of our skin" (Emecheta, 1994, 1986: 29).

Together with the racial discrimination her family experienced in Britain, Emecheta also realized that her marriage was in danger. She found herself in a difficult situation; nevertheless, she gained courage to write her first manuscript, *The Bride Price*. Unfortunately, her husband burned it. In such a case, her marriage ended in a divorce when she was a mother of five children. However, Emecheta continued her education, receiving an honors degree in sociology and a master's degree in philosophy at London University (Jagne and Parekh, 2012: 148-49).

Her writing career was influenced by Igbo story-telling tradition. Under the influence of it, Emecheta desired to be a story-teller herself (James, 1990: 37). Shortly after, she published *In the Ditch* (1972), followed by other novels which explore different sides of African women's conditions. As Mary E. Modupe Kolawole explains in her work, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, "Buchi Emecheta represents the ambivalent heritage of African women, and her experience is a symbol of the dual heritage in a practical way" (187). In this respect, most of her fiction tells the experience of Igbo women fluctuated between the social norms of their own society and those enforced by British colonialism. As a writer of diasporic origin, Emecheta then

^{*} Buchi Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen* (Oxford: Heinemann Publishers 1994) All the future references to this work will be the abbreviated title SC and the numbers of page.

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illustrates how these forces oppress these women in her fiction from the consciousness of being an African and a woman (Umeh, 1996: xxxv).

Even though Emecheta portrays the hard times of black women in her fiction, she rejects feminist labelling in relation to her works and herself. She then highlights that “the main themes of my novels are African society and family; the historical, social, and political life in Africa as seen by a woman through events” (Bruner and David, 1985: 11). She further adds that “I always try to show that the African male is oppressed and he too oppresses the African woman... I have not committed myself to the cause of African women only. I write about Africa as a whole” (Bruner and David, 1985: 11). Here, through her fiction, Emecheta’s intention is to both portray the oppressed African women in racist or patriarchal societies and to show the negative impact of this oppression on the lives of African men.

Her rejection of being labelled as a feminist is also highlighted in her speech: “Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes... I did not know that by doing so I was being feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small ‘f’” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 7). Subsequently, she clarifies her perception of feminism in an interview: “I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don’t worry about water, you don’t worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now I buy land, and I say ‘Okay, I can’t build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting’. That is my brand of feminism” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 7). Regarding the “African type of feminism”, “womanism,” the term phrased by Alice Walker, refers to women of color who hope to define themselves instead of being defined by others (Bates, 2005: 99). In this manner, Emecheta hopes not to be defined by Western feminist ideology, the origins of which reinforce the superiority of white Western women.

2. The Influences of Colonialism on Nigerian People

As an autobiographical novel, Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) reflects the struggles of Nigerian immigrants, especially that of Emecheta’s fictional representative, Adah Obi and her family, depicting the progression of Adah’s life including her childhood in Lagos, her marriage and children, her immigration to Britain and her divorce in 1960.

In the first two chapters of *Second-Class Citizen*, it is possible to notice the impact of British colonial rule on Nigerian people and thereby to find evidence about the perception of Britain as a dream land. As McLeod states, colonialism was maintained “by persuading people to internalise its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonisers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world” (18).

Thus, during the colonial rule, English language, British education, British missionaries, Anglican Church and British institutions produced false perception of Britain, which prepared the colonised to immigrate to Britain since they considered Britain as a land of dream where they can fulfil their desires. With regard to the Nigerian immigrants, most of them, like Emecheta’s husband, Francis, were students intending to earn a degree in Britain and return to Nigeria. Emecheta then describes why these Nigerian students chose Britain as follows:

These groups of men calculated that with independence would come prosperity, the opportunity for self-rule, posh vacant jobs, and more money, plenty of it. One had to be eligible for these jobs, though, thought these men. The only place to secure this eligibility, this passport to prosperity, was England. They must come to England, get a quick degree in Law and go back to rule their country. What could be more suitable? (SC, 1994: 81)

Accordingly, these men left their jobs, their families and “packed their bags for the trip to the United Kingdom in search of education, in search of eligibility” (SC, 1994: 81).

In this sense, the narrator gives details about the return of one of these men, the first lawyer of the town, Lawyer Nweze. The preparations of Ibuza women for the lawyer and their expectations from him are therefore apparent reflections of a colonial outlook since the high value is attached to him and the arrival of this new lawyer means the “arrival of their own Messiah” (SC, 1994: 2).

It is easily noticeable that Adah, too, is attracted by the exaggerated stories about Britain, which has created a false perception of Britain as well as a temptation to go to Britain. In this respect, her decision to go to Britain is evidently stimulated by the influence of the British missionaries on Adah at the Methodist Girls’ High School in Lagos; that is the Anglican belief and teaching, together with the influence of colonialism.

In addition to the influences of colonialism and Anglicanism on Nigerian people, poverty and lack of opportunities in their homeland forced Nigerians to immigrate Britain as is evident by Papa Noble’s utterance:



Papa Noble told them that he was born in a tree. His mother fed him on breast milk until he was almost twelve. He had to be weaned because he was by then old enough to join the menfolk in the farm work. He never wore clothes until he was taken into the army. Yes, he said, all children in Nigeria were brought up like that. There was no food, people died of dysentery every day. He ate meat only twice in the year during the yam festival and the festival of his father's gods. In fact, he only started to live when he came to England (SC, 1994: 95-96).

In a likely manner, Adah hopes to raise her social position in her homeland after spending some time in Britain because "[s]he knew that all she did would go towards making her young family into a family of Igbo élites, just like Lawyer Nweze of Ibuza" (SC, 1994: 21). It is obvious that as the former colonial power, Britain still refers to prosperity, good education, good career and success for nearly all the Nigerians including Adah.

3. The Migratory and Bodily Experiences of the Igbo Woman

Oppressed and discriminated in her Igbo culture, as an Igbo woman, Adah expects that she will find comfort and happiness during her stay in Britain with her family, for Britain appears to offer "freedom" for her. In Barthelemy's words, "... female biology and patriarchal imperatives focus the women's attention on "liberating" aspects of Western culture even as the women seek to find ways to adhere to indigenous culture that Emecheta believes oppresses them" (560-61).

Upon her arrival in Britain, Adah feels the cold wind "as heavy and hurtful as a blow from a boxer" (SC, 1994: 32). The difference between the climatic conditions of Nigeria and Britain serves as a signal for Adah that her life in Britain will bring difficulties. In such a case, she cannot prevent herself from thinking "[b]ut if, as people said, there was plenty of money in England, why then did the natives give their visitors this poor cold welcome?" (SC, 1994: 33). It is then clear that coldness, winds, greyness and snow in Britain make the adjustment process of Nigerian immigrants difficult.

In addition, another difficulty Adah and her family confront in Britain is the inadequacy of English. Even though they realize the necessity of speaking English to succeed in Britain, they have a tendency to speak Yoruba or Igbo. In an interview, Emecheta reveals the linguistic barrier for the immigrant living in Britain when the interviewer asks the reason why she does not experiment so much with English language: "My emotional language is Igbo. I also speak Yoruba. As this is the first language I spoke as a child, it will always be my emotional language" (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, 1992: 98).

In Britain, Adah and Francis are forced to live under very miserable conditions due to the economic problems and the racist attitudes of the white people while looking for a proper house. In such a case, regarding the disappointment Adah experiences in Britain, Francis reminds her of the fact that as black immigrants, they are considered and discriminated as "second-class citizens" (SC, 1994: 37).

One of the most striking examples portraying their miserable living condition is their decision to give birth at home in order to get the six pounds the government pays to the women giving birth at home. However, she has to deliver the baby at the hospital. There she realizes that the women around her are treated with love and respect by their husbands. Once more, she protests against her inferior and subordinated position: "... [S]he hated being what she was. Why was it she could be loved as an individual, the way the sleek woman was being loved, for what she was and not just because she could work and hand over her money like a docile child? (SC, 1994: 120) At the same time, she was the only woman in ward still wearing the hospital dress despite all the humiliation and shame she had to experience.

As soon as the black immigrants arrive in Britain, they realize that Britain is completely different from what they expected. They suffer from unfavourable accommodation, poverty, discrimination, racism, and degradation due to their skin colour. In order to cope with these problems and to survive in Britain, the Nigerian immigrants then tend to live and come together in houses and blocks in an alien country. That is to say, they remain in their ghettos and thereby their integration to British society is delayed. Likewise, due to the same problems and their desire to return to their homeland, their relations to British people are restricted.

As a reflection of the inferior position of black immigrants in Britain, most of the Nigerian families with children send their children away to the white foster-mother:

They say that in England Nigerian children have two sets of mothers - the natal mother, and the social mother. As soon as a Nigerian housewife in England realised that she was expecting a child, ... she would advertise for a foster-mother. No one cared whether a woman was suitable or not, no one wanted to know whether the house was clean or not; all they wanted to be sure of was that the foster-mother was white. The concept of 'whiteness' could cover a multitude of sins (SC, 1994: 44).



In case of Adah and Francis's children, Adah hasn't made any attempt to look for a foster-mother for their children. However, Francis believes that an English foster-mother will be much better for their children since "[n]o African child lives with his parents. It is not convenient; it is not possible. There is no accommodation for it.... Only first-class citizens lived with their children, not the blacks" (SC, 1994: 45-46).

Even though her husband, her neighbours in Ashdown Street, almost everybody around her try to suppress her desire to lead a better life, Adah resists the standard of living they are expected to live by means of her regular job and her insistence on not sending her children to a foster mother (SC, 1994: 73). Then, she realizes that she suffers fragmentation and develops a suspicious attitude: "She, who only a few months previously would have accepted nothing but the best, had by now been conditioned to expect inferior things. She was now learning to suspect anything beautiful and pure. Those things were for the whites, not for the blacks" (SC, 1994: 71). In fact, these "inferiority feelings" are the result of former British colonial rule which exercised its power by degrading the Nigerians in their own country and in Britain, but Adah is unable to realize that the whites are the real oppressors (SC, 1994: 70). Likewise, Francis gets angry with the Indian doctor and blames him when he refuses to come to see his son Vicky: "The bleeding Indian man. Do you know the stupid man thinks he is white? He is as black as the devil!... Do you know that he is as ugly as hell?" (SC, 1994: 144). At this point, Adah's reaction to his anger is remarkable because it emphasizes how the blacks were imposed that their skin colour is something bad or something to feel shame: "Well, all that seemed logical to Adah. If the man was as black as the devil, it followed that he would be as ugly as hell" (SC, 1994: 144).

Throughout the novel, another effect of colonialism occurs when the formerly colonised black people have affairs with white women in Britain. Accordingly, not only Adah's husband Francis but also Pa Noble as well as Mr. Babalola have "a certain tenderness towards any white women" (SC, 1994: 96). In this respect, the narrator explains the reasons about their tendency towards white women:

They came, failed to make a foothold, in England, sought consolation in the pubs, got themselves involved with the type of women who frequented the pubs - because it was just after the war, when many unattached women were around, and that, of course, meant goodbye to their Law studies and a happy welcome to a house full of half-caste children! Nearly all the failures married white women. Maybe it was the only way of boosting their egos, or was it a way of getting even with their colonial masters? (SC, 1994: 83)

Like nearly all the failures, Francis has an affair with Trudy, a white child-minder, who will provide access for him into the British society and satisfy his ego. In fact, before their arrival in Britain, they had many expectations for their families, for their homeland and for themselves. However, most of them failed to fulfil their dreams in Britain:

If they remembered their original dream, the dream of reading Law and becoming an elite in their newly independent country, they buried it deep in their bitter hearts. It was such a disappointment, too bitter to put into words. When these men fell so disastrously, their dreams were crushed within them. The dream of becoming an aristocracy became a reality of being a black, a nobody, a second-class citizen (SC, 1994: 83)

4. The Double Otherness of Igbo Woman

In *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta also sheds lights on the double fold otherness of Adah as a "woman" and as a "black person" (Umeh, 1996: xxxv). Accordingly, her birth turned out to be a disappointment for her family as they were expecting a boy "so, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth" (SC, 1994: 1). In other words, Adah was born into a patriarchal society which refers to the oppression and exploitation of women. Similarly, the birth of Titi, Adah's daughter, is also a disappointment for her family because "after a long and a painful ordeal she had come home to Francis bearing a girl. Everybody looked at her with an 'is that all?' look" (SC, 1994: 116).

At first, Adah is excluded from education due to her sex. However, the expectation that "the longer she stayed at school, the bigger the dowry her future husband would pay for her" (SC, 1994: 12) should be emphasized. In addition, when her father dies, she is sent to her mother's brother's house as a servant and thereby she becomes a slave under the control of her master in her childhood. Clearly, the Igbo culture demonstrates a low opinion of women and it degrades them who are unable to do anything properly, but eat, talk and sleep (SC, 1994: 7). Women are treated as inferior and second-class human beings.

Furthermore, marriage also makes the oppression of women possible in the novel; they are bought like properties with bride-price and thereby women are expected to be submissive to their husbands. In her



marriage, Adah has very little expectation from her husband concerning love, fidelity, companionship. As the patriarchal culture promises, Adah does not have the right to make a decision in the family matters even though she earns much more money than her husband. In such a case, Adah feels displeasure regarding Francis' submitting the dictates of the patriarchal culture as "most of the decisions about their own lives had to be referred first to Big Pa, Francis' father, then to his mother, then discussed amongst the brothers of the family before Adah was referred to" (SC, 1994: 23).

Moreover, Igbo culture accuses the women of a marriage without children. Fortunately, "[Adah] was very prolific which among the Igbos, is still the greatest asset a woman can have. A woman can be forgiven everything as long as she produced children" (SC, 1994: 22). At the same time, high importance is then attributed to only the sons who will sustain families.

Later, her marriage gets worse due to her husband's selfishness, indifference and coldness toward her, which becomes more evident in Britain. In such a case, her loneliness and frustration are easily noticeable: "She was beginning to understand why some young wives went to the extent of being unfaithful, just to make themselves feel human, just to find another human being who would listen to their voices, who would tell them that it was going to be all right" (SC, 1994: 55). In this respect, when Okpara, a stranger, comes to console her at the park and then accompanies her home, Adah does not care because "her mind was crying for someone to listen to her, to understand her" (SC, 1994: 157).

Another factor in the suppression of women in the novel is the Anglican way of education and religious teachings, which lead her to confusion and turn out to be useless for her problems. For instance, she was caned by her teacher for laughing in the class, or she was caned for stealing the money with which she is expected to buy meat. After having being caned, "she did not believe in that stuff of loving your enemy. After all, God did not like the Devil, so why should she pray for the man who had the heart to cane her for a good two hours with a koboko?" (SC, 1994: 18). Apparently, the restrictions of Igbo culture were complicated by colonialism.

Even though she has been dreaming of removing herself from the restraints of patriarchal Igbo society in Lagos, Britain appears to be a country far from satisfying her desires. First of all, she once more suffers from gender discrimination in Britain because according to immigration laws, women are allowed to come to Britain as long as they are married and their husbands are already in Britain. "It is allowed for African males to come and get civilised in England. But that privilege has not been extended to females yet" (SC, 1994: 34).

In Britain, she realizes that the British people are not different from the blacks. The whites are liable to make mistakes as everyone else, which is in contrast with what has been taught to the blacks in school and at church. For instance, Trudy destroys the myth she was brought up to believe that the white never lies (SC, 1994: 51). Then, Adah begins to question the teachings the blacks were imposed by asking "why, then did they claim to be superior?" (SC, 1994: 52).

At the same time, she discovers that the British people have an individual and private life style as opposed to Nigerian people who behave according to the tribal rules and interfere with other people's private lives. At Christmas, the British people prefer silence in contrast to the lively atmosphere in Nigeria. In relation to the individualistic feature of British people, her religious beliefs change and the result is remarkable: "London, having thus killed Adah's congregational God, created instead a personal God who loomed large and really alive. She did not have to go to church to see this One" (SC, 1994: 159).

In the novel, what worries Adah most is the description 'second-class'" (SC, 1994: 38), but she is determined to fight against this kind of humiliating attitudes. She feels first-class only in the libraries she works in because her education in Lagos and her first job as a librarian at the American Embassy provide her with a "first-class citizen's job" in Britain. Through her jobs at three different libraries, she gradually gains economic freedom.

Her education, working experience and economic power strengthen her resistance toward Francis. For instance, she has a strong desire not to submit to her husband any more especially for the matters related to her body. Then, she decides to be fitted with a diaphragm without the permission of her husband. In this respect, she establishes her difference from the other Nigerian women.

In the meantime, Adah buys a copy of Teach Yourself to Write and begins to write the manuscript of The Bride Price, but Francis destroys it. He discourages the possibility of her being a writer in Britain as he says, "You keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black. The white men can barely tolerate us men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breast-feed her baby" (SC, 1994: 178). For him, the duties of a woman are to deliver and look after children, to look after



her husband, to do the housework, to provide money for the family and to be a woman to him at any time (SC, 1994: 175). That is to say, he believes that a woman is a second-class human (SC, 1994: 175). In this manner, the destruction of the manuscript, their marriage certificate, her passport paves the way for the destruction of their marriage and the indication of a new life for Adah as well as the indication of Francis' failure to integrate into the British society. Now, she is ready to integrate into the British society, enjoying her blackness and freedom.

In opposition to Adah, Francis is unable to adjust to British values and standards and poses an obstacle for her with regard to her freedom. From the beginning, Francis is depicted as a man whose mentality has been shaped by male-dominated Igbo cultural practices and traditions which elevate men and degrade women. While Adah is forced to support her family, Francis goes to school, fails his exams and has affairs with women. Instead of working and earning money, he prefers to lead a passive, inactive life because "he had been used to being worked for, by a woman whom he knew belonged to him by right" (SC, 1994: 131).

In spite of her extreme efforts, Adah turns out to be a scapegoat for all his failures and deficiencies. At this point, his inability and resistance to change is important in understanding his failures in Britain. The striking evidence of his inability to change is to burn Adah's manuscript and all the other documents she needs in Britain. This act can also be considered as an indication of his weakness and failure to adjust to the British society. At the same time, unlike Adah, Francis fails to have a good education, job experience and economic freedom which would make his integration into Britain possible.

5. Conclusion

It is then possible to state that in *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta reflects the problems, prejudices, degradation which most black people face in an alien society. In case of Adah, she is forced to carry the burden of being a woman and being a black together with the other problems common to all immigrants. In both Nigeria and Britain, she struggles against and challenges the discrimination and the prejudices, hindering her personal development and adjustment. However, the problems she face gradually transform her because of the cultural and social differences between Nigeria and Britain. Unlike Francis, she does not resist such differences as she seems willing to cultural integration in Britain. She believes that if she depends on the rules set by the Igbo society, she is bound to fail. Inevitably, in the process of transformation and cultural integration, she has to fulfil the requirements of the host country. In the end, she appears to have accomplished her dream as she has established her individuality, adapted to Britain, gained economic freedom and equality.

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