

A Critical Evaluation of Emecheta's Portrayal of the Female Gender in Second Class Citizens

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Introduction

In this work, there is an evaluation of how Buchi Emecheta portrayed women in two societies- African and Western- in her novel, *The Second Class Citizen*. The choice of Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* is done to capture the travails of women as depicted in her fiction during the postcolonial era. The novel puts an emphasis on challenges women face with traditional patriarchal institutions.

With most African societies being patriarchal in nature, males are seen as the superior sex. This outlook accounts for the resistance of women to patriarchal subjugation and subordination and thereafter the emergence of women's movements. Creative writers like Buchi Emecheta have their materials and story line sourced from the world of reality and this has helped highlight the background of women struggle against oppression. Distinguished for her vivid descriptions of female subordination and conflicting cultural values in Africa, Emecheta's fiction focuses on the plight of African women who struggle against patriarchal family structures, unfair gender stereotypes, and contradictory social values in Africa. Noted for her realistic characters, conversational prose style, and sociological interest, she is highly regarded for introducing an authentic female perspective to contemporary African literature.

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In *Second Class Citizen*, Emecheta presents a thorough exploration of gender discrimination in her native Nigerian society and in African immigrant communities in Britain. Adah, the protagonist, is from a strictly patriarchal Nigerian society where girls and women are programmed from the earliest years of their lives to believe that they are inferior to the male folks. *Second Class Citizen* illustrates further a society that is battling with urbanisation, tradition versus modernity, patriarchy, cultural stereotypes, gender discriminations, female independence and assertiveness, and the valorisation of the male gender among others.

Emecheta through *Second Class Citizen* exposes how patriarchal traditions and cultures choke women's potentials. She sees the patriarchal system as the problem and not the individual men themselves. Such patriarchal traditions were expressed through gender discriminations, cultural stereotypes, domestic violence and the valorisation of the male child over the female child. Thus, this work concentrates on interrogating some issues identified in *Second Class Citizens* about discrimination against women emanating from patriarchal nature of society. From *Second Class Citizen*, so much can be gleaned regarding how women are wrongly treated or perceived in the patriarchal system that Emecheta writes about. Some are: the preferences given to boys' over girls' right to education, the erroneous belief that women sit in the house, eat, gossip and sleep (7), levirate system of marriage which ensured that a woman is married off to her husband's brother upon the death of her husband, the commitment to educating the male-child at the expense of females in times of disaster in the family (12), the fact that no one was interested in the woman for her own sake, but in the money she would fetch and the housework she would do (13); the demand for a huge bride price on a girl whom the family refused to help to get education (19), the fear regarding a woman earning more (20) and, the woman as someone reduced to earning good money and more importantly producing children (22). Others include: the fact that the extended family has so much say in decision-making, even regarding a woman's nuclear family (23), the fact that even though the woman may be making the money, yet going to the United Kingdom was a privilege the man is to enjoy at her expense (23), that women are to be dictated to and meant to sacrifice their dreams for men (23). Added to these are issues relating to the fact that the

woman is seen as nothing more than a piece of property (31), that only African males can be civilised in England, not the female (34), that women exist, in marriage, for the sexual pleasure of men; that no matter how busy a woman is, it is her duty to still look after her, as against “our”, children (43), that educated African women were not to be brought to London and allowed to mix with middle class Englishwomen (64), and the tendency to brand women as wicked hindrances to the progress of their husbands among others. Some of these are further analysed below.

Notes on Emecheta’s Portrayal of Women in *Second Class Citizen*

Obvious in *Second Class Citizens* is the presentation of females as occupying the position behind men. Emecheta shows how this obtains in, one, the family into which the female child is born and, two, the family into which she marries. As regards the family into which she is born, the girlchild is painted as an after-thought and one who should not have much invested into her because it ends up being a waste and any investment whatsoever is only as a result of what is to be gained by those making those investments.

Born into the Igbo culture which prized boys far more highly than girls, Adah, the protagonist, “was a girl who had arrived when everyone was 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. She was so insignificant” (1). This is so because to her people, “though a girl may be counted as one child, a boy was like four children put together” (62) . Due to her gender, Adah was deprived of many things that a boy would normally have access to. For instance, the need to send her to school was not prioritised as against that of the need to send her brother. As a child, Adah had to force her way into the classroom of a friendly neighbouring teacher before she is enrolled in school. Even though the Igbos realise that “education was one’s saviour from poverty and disease, boys were usually given preference” (3) thus putting the girl-child at a disadvantaged position. Even if she was allowed to go to school, she would probably not stay long as “a year or two would do, as long as she can write her name and count” (3). This sort of gender discrimination plays out again at the death of Pa, Adah’s father. It was decided that “all the money in the family, would be spent on Boy’s grammar school education” (12). So Boy was obviously put

at an advantaged position over his sister. Adah was only allowed to continue schooling because “the longer she stayed at school, the bigger the dowry her future husband would pay for her.” And whatever comes in from the dowry would be used to complete Boy’s education. This patriarchal perception of the traditional Igbo culture puts the female child at a disadvantage.

To buttress the theme of gender discrimination further, Adah began to nurse the idea of going to England to study. Francis was allowed by his father to travel to England to study but Adah was not allowed to. As Francis puts it “Father does not approve of women going to the UK. But you see, you will pay for me and look after yourself, and within three years, I’ll be back.”(24). Adah is a second class citizen in her own home country. She is equally second-class citizen in England both because she is black “She knew that there was discrimination all over the place” and because the Nigerian-in-diaspora community replicates the patriarchal values of the mother country. Mr. Okpara, is a Nigerian (Igbo by tribe) who replicates the patriarchal value while in London. “You’ve had a fight with your husband? ... Let’s go and beg his forgiveness. He would let you in.’ Typical Igbo Psychology; men never do wrong, only the women; they have to beg for forgiveness because they are bought, paid for and must remain like that, silent, obedient slaves” (164).

In *Second Class Citizen*, women are limited to the roles they perform at the domestic level, especially in the home. Daughters are taught to be useful to the men as wives, cooks, housekeepers, and for their sexual gratification. We read that Francis comes from a family that the girls perform all duties in the house, thereby making Francis to think that women should shoulder all responsibilities. “Adah started to curse her mother-in-law for spoiling all her sons. There are so many girls in the family that the boys grew up thinking they were something special (super human creatures) (102). Emecheta, through her fiction, challenged the masculinist assumption that women should be defined as domestic properties whose value resides in their ability to keep the home, bear children and in their willingness to remain confined at home without any personal ambition. The author describes this patriarchal culture of valorising some children thus: “among the Igbos, the greatest asset a woman could have was to be prolific. She could be

forgiven anything as long as she produced children” (22). Adah was simply being exploited for what she could offer, be it children, money and comfort as “she earned enough money to keep them all going.” The fact that she was still laying the golden egg stopped Francis from walking out on her. As before, her pay bound him to her” (40). Akorede 2011:164 posits that in an indigenous African society, the wife belongs to the whole family and to the entire clan in some restricted social context. This is because, the bride price paid signifies she has been bought and as such she has no control over her own life. Emecheta explains that, “in Africa, and among the Igbos in particular, a girl was little more than a piece of property. Adah had been bought, though on credit” (31). Having been bought, a wife has no voice of her own or her own opinion. The author explains further that “as most young African wives know, most of the decisions about their own lives had to be referred to Big Pa, Francis father, then to his mother, then discussed among the brothers of the family before Adah was referred to,” even when she is the one earning the money (23). Ezewanebe (2000) thus holds that:

Adah’s life as a wife is one of constant struggle against oppression and exploitation. Emecheta’s anger against the traditional Igbo family is therefore justified. She detests the system where women are owned as any other property, a structure that traps and enslaves women, an environment that forces women into subservience, regardless of their achievements and potential just because they are women.
(351-52)

As an author who is quite critical of patriarchal tribal culture, she exposes the injustice of traditional, male-oriented African social customs that relegate women to a life of child-bearing, servitude, and victimisation. To attest to this, Adah tries to get Francis to read the manuscript of her first book, but Francis reminded her of her status and says “you are a second class citizen” (37) and “you keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black. The white man can barely tolerate us men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breastfeed her baby.” (178). Emecheta also decries the fact that men abandon their wives in Nigeria under the guise of coming to London to study. These women must not complain “otherwise they would have been branded as wicked

women who stood in the ways of their ambitious husbands.” These ambitious husbands would them return to Nigeria “declaring their old illiterate wives redundant while taking one of the newly emerging graduate females in Nigeria as a wife” (82). This unfair discrimination and subjugation of the female folk is buttressed further by the author as she wrote: “It is allowed for African males to come and get civilised in England. But that privilege has not been extended to females yet” (34). Emecheta thus portrays the society as one that forces women into subservience, regardless of their achievements and potentials just because they are women. Fisher (2002:115) believes that with her fiction, Emecheta exposes the tradition that demands women’s self-sacrifice in Nigeria as well as those conditions abroad that hurt women émigrés. The author protests the limiting of women’s potentials to child bearing while advocating for better opportunities for the women folk. In spite of her second-class status, Adah engages in a tenacious struggle for freedom and self-achievement which ultimately allows her to improve her situation through education

Domestic violence is a systematic pattern of behaviours that includes physical battering, coercive control, economic abuse, emotional abuse, and/or sexual violence. It is intended to gain or maintain power and control over a romantic or intimate partner to intimidate, frighten, terrorise, humiliate, blame, or injure. Traditional African beliefs are often used to justify domestic violence as it is believed among traditional African males that a man has the right to correct or discipline his wife. In the view of Holderread Heggen, the inherent logic of patriarchy says that if men have the right to power and control over women and children, they also have the right to enforce that control. Thus domination and glorification of violence are characteristics of patriarchal societies. (1993:85). Francis was a product of a patriarchal society and as such would regularly assault his wife sexually, verbally and physically. He believes that he has the right to “knock his wife around.” To Francis, “a woman was a second class human, to be slept with at any time, even during the day, and, if she refused, to have sense beaten into her until she gave in; to be ordered out of bed after he had done with her” (175).

Conclusion: Addressing Patriarchy’s Effect on Women

The beauty of Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* is that it shows that while ordinarily one would think women undergo some form of injustice

due to the fact that they are economically disadvantaged because they earn less than men, yet even when women earn more than men, the system is still not in favour of the women. However, while it is necessary to keep demanding social change in relation to how women are treated in society, it is important to look for some solutions that can help women cope with discrimination emanating from patriarchal systems. One of such solution is ensuring that the girl-child is well-educated. This solution, seems to be what Emecheta suggests herself, for it was what liberated Adah to question many ills of her society. Emecheta through the protagonist, Adah, draws attention to women's second class status globally while proposing an improvement in living conditions for all women through education. Education was also instrumental to ensuring that Adah climbed the social ladder to an upper class from the one into which she was born. Education is not just useful for liberating the minds of women, it is important in positioning women economically by ensuring that they acquire the capabilities that enable them to compete well for available jobs or bring the best possible innovation to bear in executing those businesses they establish.

Women also need to learn to stop socialising the girl-child and the boychild in aspects of culture which demean women. There is no doubt that women play a pivotal role in the family and in the enculturation of children. In dispensing this task, it is important that they are mindful of portraying women in shades that affect them negatively. Women indeed can be regarded as their own greatest liberator and they must achieve for themselves what society fails to achieve. Offspring need to be brought up to challenge and end negative perceptions of women. For instance, the woman of the house need not have a different standard for raising male children and another one for bringing up females. House chores should not be distributed based on gender, and the male child need not be brought up to believe that he has some advantages over the female. The mentality, on the part of females accepting certain social roles allotted to them by patriarchy needs to be challenged at the family level; and this can best be done by the woman of the house. By doing this, we believe that the woman stops reinforcing patriarchy. In fact, it is important to point out that men are victims of patriarchy as much as women. This is because a lot of time they were just wrongly socialised to believe that they are acting culturally right or that what they

are doing is culturally acceptable. Women, as mothers, are often at the forefront of selling that tragic outlook on life to them.

In the case of Africa, poverty needs to be addressed. The girl-child receiving education can travel far in life before she is married off. However, because most families are not doing well financially, the girl-child becomes the victim, she is often forced out of school, or in some situation where she hawks around, she gets impregnated and her situation made worse-off. To curtail this, governments of African states need to do more to build a system of free education which allows children to have access to education irrespective of the disaster happening at the family front. Perhaps, more determined girls, like Adah, can continue their education far beyond what some families can afford to make it in life.

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