

CLAMOUR FOR A HEYDAY: HARASSMENT OF WOMEN AND EMANCIPATORY STRATEGIES AS REGISTERED IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *SECOND CLASS CITIZEN*

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ABSTRACT

Buchi Emecheta is one of the most prodigious writers of Africa and her credentials bear testimony to this great phenomenon. Being born as a woman, in a patriarchal dominant Nigeria, of the tribe of Igbo, her growth as an erudite literary scholar in the international arena is incomprehensible. Her impeccable character and versatile nature are conspicuous to all, as she possesses the dynamics of an essayist, writer, playwright, and an orator. Having authored more than twenty books, she delves in detail the deplorable condition of black women in Nigeria and offers an insight to dismantle the power structure that has been erroneously construed by male chauvinism to subjugate women for ages. Invariably, in all her novels she offers a picturesque presentation of the cruel menace and ordeals that have been unleashed on women unjustly and attempts to revamp their dampening spirit through employing emancipatory tactics in order to salvage their legacy.

KEYWORDS: *Emancipation, Feminism, Harassment, Patriarchy, And Strategy*

INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta is one of the most renowned writers of Africa and her credentials bear testimony to this great phenomenon. Being born as a woman, in a patriarchal dominant Nigeria, of the tribe of Igbo, her growth as an erudite literary scholar in the international arena is incomprehensible. Marie Umeh quotes Bernth Lindfors in her introduction to the book *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, where he recognizes Emecheta's contribution, complimenting her through his empirical survey entitled *Big Shots and Little Shots of the Anglophone African Literary Canon*, as an outstanding contemporary women writer of Africa, along with other three women viz., Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Efua Sutherland (xxxix). Her writings are born not out of pure imagination, nor are they of mere fiction. They are brought forth out of personal, experiential knowledge and with deep-seated reflection. They are simple, intelligible and down to earth. It draws the attention of readers of all walks of life, as it reflects the predicament of womenfolk and their resolve to combat.

Emecheta's experience with the daily life situations within the family, the society of Nigeria and Britain at large, embolden her to offer a vivid presentation of the degrading condition of women. The pangs of pain that she experienced at different phases of life were given shape in the form of novels, autobiographical works, children's books and a collection of photographs. Umeh mentions that Emecheta's journey as a writer began in the year 1972 and she strived hard to reach the stature of an impeccable writer thereafter. She adds a new feather to her cap as her works were translated into fourteen

languages across the world including Dutch, French, German, and Swedish.(xxiii). She is dynamic and versatile in character as she possesses the role of an essayist, writer, playwright, and an orator. She is also the recipient of many prestigious awards including Jock Campbell Award from the New Statesman in 1978, and honorary Doctor of Literature degree in 1992 from Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey.

The patriarchal community has been partial towards womenfolk, as it deprives them of their legitimate position and role in literature. It is conspicuous, that the menfolk continue to be instrumental in advocating and exercising the onslaught on women. It goes without saying that the women across the world have been portrayed as objects of amusement and pleasure, and have been treated unfairly. Their victimization is encouraged by the callous men, who unleash violence in different forms. The female sex is at the receiving end of all sorts of cruel menaces like gender-based violence, rape, sexual harassment, abortion, female infanticide, child marriage, and prostitution etc., In order to dilute the merits, potentialities of women, and to downplay their worth, social and cultural constructions have been created by the suppressive men. Beauvoir reiterates in *The Second Sex* that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (qtd. In Gamble 195). Her assertion indicates the twentieth century thought the pattern that spelt that femininity was a social construction which subsequently led to further ramifications as far as women are concerned.

It goes without saying that the plight of women needs to be unraveled and the hypocrisy of hierarchical structure needs to be exposed in order to obtain an equitable treatment for women. Who will bell the cat? Who will combat in the women's struggle? Undoubtedly, the agents who carry out the ordeals on women will never come to their aid. But, it is the women, who need to take up the responsibility to fight for their cause. Miriam Schneir in her introduction to the book entitled *The Vintage Book of Feminism: The Essential Writings of the Contemporary Women's Movement* makes a reference to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's inaugural address at the Seneca Falls in 1848, where Stanton echoed "that woman herself must do this work; for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degradation" (ix).

Emecheta, having witnessed the trivialization of women in the Igbo land, enumerates through her novels, the pathetic plight of women and their survival strategies. She challenges the existing social and cultural practices that enslave women and provides us with the remedy, echoing the need for respecting women and offering their rightful space in literature and society. Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo observes in her article entitled *Tradition and the African Female Writer: The Example of Buchi Emecheta* that Emecheta through her works specifies three important aspects of the lives of African women like, an investigation into the social, economic and historical conditions of women, dismantling of the myths that encircle women, and devising strategies to withstand the oppression of the patriarchy (6).

Second Class Citizen (1974) is one of Emecheta's best novels composed against the background of traditional Igbo social surroundings and colonial Nigeria. The author's agenda in the above-mentioned novel is of twofold in nature. Primarily, it is to narrate the agony the women suffer under the clutches of male chauvinism and secondarily, to counter the patriarchy with a set of tactics that would salvage women's legacy and position in literature, and in society at large to stand in par with men. In defining Patriarchy, Bene E Madunagu in an article entitled *The Nigerian Feminist Movement: Lessons from "Women in Nigeria"*, WIN, states that "Patriarchy is a system of male authority which legitimizes the oppression of women through political, social, economic, legal cultural, religious and military institutions" (670). Thus, the Androcentric ideology

aims at keeping the men at the center and ostracizing the women to the fringes of society; it grabs the privileges and fortunes for men while relegating the mean and meagre role for women. It is a systematic and organized conspiracy to deprive women of their rightful place and perpetuate the slavish mentality in them, which would be beneficial to the menfolk exclusively.

Second-Class Citizen revolves around the story of Adah, who was born in a family against the wish of her parents and therefore she felt alienated. The parents and relatives expected a boy child but the birth of a girl called Adah only increased their dissatisfaction and disgruntlement (1). Adah was sent to study in a sub-standard school, but the sudden demise of her father thwarted her dream. She was entrusted to live under the custody of her maternal uncle as a servant, yet she did not give up her studies amidst all the household chores (12). Wollstonecraft, as a precursor for women's emancipation, reiterates that girls' education is indispensable for their economic independence because it would ensure them to have a free and dignified life (qtd. In Gamble 17).

In realizing about the need to survive,

Adah learned very early to be responsible for herself. Nobody was interested in her for her own sake, only in the money she would fetch and the housework she could do, and Adah, happy at being given this opportunity of survival, did not waste time thinking about its rights or wrongs. She had to survive (13).

As her mother got married to her paternal uncle, the burden of supporting the family with finance fell upon her shoulder and therefore she was told to give up her studies and get married to an elderly man as per the custom. "She knew that all Igbo women did this, but she wasn't going to!" (14). Adah was paid two shillings to purchase a pound of steak from the shop. But she kept it safe for paying her entrance examination fee to the school of her dream. She lied and saved the money for her study and pretended as though money was lost. She thought about the sayings of Jesus in the Bible, where He wants people to possess the shrewdness of the snake and the innocence of the doves (16). She was beaten badly with a cane called 'Koboko'. The hundred and three severe strokes of her cousin Vincent did not weaken her morale and she stood firm without shedding tears. Her heart and mind were focused on getting admission in school and make a progress (17).

Her hard work bequeathed blessings upon her - she succeeded in the entrance examination and won a scholarship (18). Her aspiration to propel in her study, marriage with Francis, and employment as a librarian in the American Library at Campbell Street continued (20). Adah assisted Francis financially to undertake his studies in the United Kingdom and was hopeful that she too would visit the United Kingdom, the dream of her life (23). One needs to remember that it was a patriarchal society and therefore a woman had to subscribe to the whims and fancies of men folk. She was shocked to know through her husband that the father of the house (Pa) did not consent to her proposal and therefore, she had to remain at home and continue with her job and assist the family financially. Her disappointment was almost like a bolt from blue, yet she did not lose hope. She resolved that she had to be prudent to execute her plan - "Be as cunning as a serpent but as harmless as a dove" (24).

She was waiting to join her husband, who flew to England for study and therefore she devised a new strategy - to convince her in-laws through the power of her tongue. She made her mother-in-law believe that if she were to be employed in abroad, she would earn more money and their in-laws life will be comfortable; they would afford to have a car and other facilities which would raise their status and reputation in the society. Although, her father-in-law was suspicious about her

intention, yet they complied with her ideas and she won the approval of the family with the help of her argument (29) – ‘the power of the tongue.’

After joining her husband in London, Adah was shocked to see the dilapidated condition of their living room. Their altercation resulted in a quarrel and he got enraged and said, “You must know, my dear young lady, that in Lagos you may be a million publicity officers for the Americans; you may be earning a million pounds a day; you may have hundreds of servants: you may be living like an elite, but the day you land in England, you are a second-class citizen” (37). The attribution of second –class citizen status to the blacks was causing her pain, yet she was bold to face the reality (38). Against the proposal of her husband she got employed as the senior library assistant at North Finchley Library and perhaps she was sure that a good job would guarantee her economic independence.

She worked hard and saved money for her children and family. She starved many days and longed that her husband would take her to restaurants. But, Francis believed that the restaurants in London are not meant for blacks and “She knew that there was discrimination all over the place”(57). The practice of looking down upon the blacks as inferior, Francis’s illegal relationship with Trudy, a white female babysitter for her children, and Trudy’s irresponsibility caused her hurt and pain.

The unjust treatment meted out to the blacks in a white-dominated country, which claimed to be civilized and superior was something difficult to digest for Adah. The constant reiteration of the supremacy of the whites over the blacks had deeper psychological ramifications. The blacks were made to believe,

that one had to start with the inferior and stay there because being black meant being inferior. Well, Adah did not yet believe that wholly, but what she did know was that being regarded as inferior had a psychological effect on her... but after a while, she was not going to accept it from anyone. She was going to regard herself as the equal of any white. (71)

Francis ensured that Adah served as a tool for his sexual gratification and a child-bearing machine. When her time for delivery arrived Francis did not take her to the hospital, but the midwives came forward to help her. “He was sure Adah would live. To him Adah was immortal. She just had to be there, bearing his children, working for him, taking his beatings, listening to his sermons” (110). Adah, having realized the selfish and indifferent attitude of Francis felt humiliated. Adah knew that “he was a dangerous man to live with. Like all such men, he needed victims. Adah was not going to be a willing victim” (127).

She was wise enough to understand that he was no more a compatible spouse for her as he was egoistic and authoritarian. He did not have the civility to treat his wife fairly but looked down upon her and considered her as despicable. He wanted her to be subservient under him and he resonated the mindset of the men-folk who indulged in victimizing the female sex. Adah decided to annul his relationship with Francis and secure the future of her life and of her children by becoming a writer, which was her long cherished dream and she was aware that this enterprise would stabilize her economic status and freedom. Thus, she began to pen down *The Bride Price* (172). However, Francis viewed her differently. “To him, a woman was a second-class human, to be sleeping 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; to make sure she washed his clothes and got his meals ready at the right time” (175).

Francis was envious of Adah's writing and he believed that her writing would disclose to the public the harassment that he inflicted upon her, and would put the reputation of the family in jeopardy. Therefore, he began to burn her writing in her absence. The cruel act of Francis did not dampen her spirit and morale but thrived her indomitable will to combat such ordeals and emerge as a writer (179). The heinous act of Francis could not be forgiven by Adah and therefore, she decided to look for a separate house for her and her children and resolved to spend the salary collected from the library for her children and herself. This created a bizarre kind of situation and led to a fight between them and Francis even attempted to kill her (181). Adah planned to get a divorce from Francis but he made it clear that in Nigeria, especially among the Igbos, divorce or separation was unacceptable and such practice was not prevalent either (182). Thus, he said, "a man's wife, always a man's wife until you die. You cannot escape. You are bound to him" (183). Adah did not consent to his sermons but refuted his arguments as she possessed a powerful tongue, and dismantled his belief system.

This article although focuses on the predicament and emancipatory strategies of Adah, the protagonist of *Second Class Citizen*, yet Buchi Emecheta invites all women across the world to possess Adah's strategies - the power of tongue, intellectual competency with educational qualifications, and employment skills, proficiency of writing, shrewdness and resilience in order to combat all such forces that subjugate women constantly and obtain freedom from patriarchal society.

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