

**Representing the Second Sex: Reading Buchi Emecheta's
*Second Class Citizen***

R. Rajasekar, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. C. Santhosh Kumar

=====
Second Class Citizen is one of the most important fictional works appeared in African literature, which discuss all the important issues of postcolonial literature – the quest for identity, the need for independence, the relationship with colonial culture, and the revising of the colonial past. This paper aims to examine and explore the novel *Second Class Citizen* in the light of Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Further it also concentrates on how Buchi Emecheta used her female characters in the novel *Second Class Citizen* to portray and depict how women were able to endure the struggles and challenges imposed upon them in the patriarchal society and how they come out of it and were able to challenge the male cultural supremacy. In the novel *Second class citizen*, the narrator recalls all the incidents and earlier events of her childhood which include the memories of others, her childhood imaginations.

Buchi Emecheta, Nigerian Novelist, born on August 14, 1944 in Lagos to Igbo parents, brings out the fact that men are being considered as privileged sex while women are as the second sex. In *Second Class Citizen*, Emecheta projected the practices and beliefs of African society on women. Unlike the present society it is believed that women are inferior to men and therefore the education system must avail to men. Emecheta portrayed her character how able to attain the consciousness of self through the evolution of different stages. As Marie Umeh rightly stated,

“Like modern day feminist, Emecheta is committed to work for the eradication of oppressive traditions which attach woman to a part that prevents individuals from looking realistically at their present...Her purpose in writing is then to enable African woman to free themselves from some of the oppressive elements in Igbo society.” (7)

Being an African woman, Emecheta projected African feminist consciousness in her writings. Her novels awaken the consciousness of self-identity. She creates a new world for African women to be unique and self-reliance. Emecheta brings out Adah, the protagonist of the novel *Second Class Citizen* in obtaining self through long struggle. Through Adah, Emecheta shows African woman's need to create their own notion of selfhood and challenge the male control and dominance. Emecheta depicts the quest of the protagonist in creating her own self and coming to the terms with identity as black and female. Lyod Brown, describes the Emecheta's portrayal of feministic aspects is for the individual growth of the woman.

“It is easy enough to isolate the villains in the growing list of Adah’s misfortunes, from the family members who begrudge young women an education to the embittered husband who bullies her, but the protagonist is not always as admirable as the work seems to imply. Despite her pious complaints about the evils of female subordination and the exploits of men in Igbo society, she is not above being manipulative in her turn.”(44-45)

Emecheta demonstrates the difficulties that black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their self. This theme is centred on the character of Adah who believes that to create an identity for herself and therefore she exists beyond the expectations of her community. Adah becomes conscious of being a black and female. Emecheta explicates how black woman has to accept the dual burden of being black and women in the white racial society. After the arrival of Adah in England Francis states, “You must know, my dear young lady, that in Lagos... 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” (39). Francis disclosure of second-class citizenship in England indicates that as a black they have to struggle for their identity in the white land. Adah and Francis were refused to accommodate in the white homes and forced to stay in the interior places. She understood that there is no love left for the black women. Therefore, she has to attain the self-love. She does what pleases her, though she is discarded by her husband. It makes her to pay the heavy cost; she tries to live up to the standards that she wants to create for herself. Adah was such a disappointment to her parents when her family was expecting as a boy. She started struggling right from the school days. She was unable to pay money for entrance examination which is her goal and was expected by her family to be loyal to her family and future husband. The construction of woman’s position in African culture is portrayed in the novel. It is clearly stated when Francis, Adah’s husband worried about his lower income when compared to his wife. “Do you think our marriage will last if I allow Adah to go and work for the American? Her pay will be three times my own. My colleagues at work will laugh at me. What do you think I should do?” (26). Adah knows her life within the traditional African society ruins her hope. As a young girl she was expected to fulfil her family needs. Adah was happy about the struggles and consider it as an opportunity for survival to achieve her dream.

“One might think of this evidence that Africans treated their children badly. But to Adah’s people and to Adah herself, this was not so at all: it was the custom. Children especially girls, were taught to be very useful very early in life, and this had its advantages. For instance, Adah learned very early to be responsible for herself. Nobody was interested in her for 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.” (19)

Adah believed that education is the only thing which can fulfil her dream and therefore she never worried about the hardships faced throughout the course in obtaining an education. Emecheta insisted the African women never to accept the second-class role to men. She never compromises her dream for the challenges given to her by her own family members “after a hundred and three strokes...Adah did not mind she was, in fact, very happy. She had earned the two shillings.” (23).

Emecheta encourages the attitude of the society towards women can be changed only through the consciousness of women themselves. She points out that women can challenge and contribute useful things to the society just like men. Emecheta’s agony for attaining self-identity is clearly visible through Adah when she questions herself about the independence of one’s own self. Francis wants her wife to be reliant on him. Whatever she earns it is her husband who dominates and maintains them. To fulfil her needs she had to struggle a lot. Therefore, Adah wants to be free herself and questions herself thus: “Was it necessary to have a husband brought into an issue like that? Could not the woman be given the opportunity of exercising her own will? (155).” African traditional beliefs consider women as a weaker sex and inferior to men. It is the woman who does wrong not men. Therefore, women have to beg for pardon even men found guilty. “... 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 slave.” (170). In the novel, Emecheta brings out the African patriarchal society which deceives the autonomy of women. Emecheta protests the male supremacy prevails in the Igbo culture. Through Adah we can learn the change in nature of submissive women to self-reliant.

“She thought that it was these experiences with Ma so early in life that had given her such a very low opinion of her own sex. Somebody said somewhere that our characters are usually formed early in life. Yes, that somebody was right. Women still made Adah nervous. They had a way of sapping her self-confidence. She did have one or two women friends with whom she discussed the weather and fashion. But when in real trouble, she would rather look for a man. Men were solid, so safe.” (12)

In the decision-making process women are not allowed to take part contrary to men. They are considered as child bearing and child rearing. Francis therefore hates Adah for being self reliant. Adah develops a consciousness of herself through the past experience. Whenever she earns Francis makes use of it for his own purpose without considering his family. “Adah’s pay at work was just enough to pay the rent pay for Francis’s course, his examination fees, buy his books and pay Trudy. They had little left after this and so it was impossible for Adah to have lunch at work” (62). Umeh points out the Emecheta’s treatment of characters in her novels as follows:

“The victimization and oppression of the African woman occur in many dimensions. On the one level, Adah is deceived by the men in her life. In another she is oppressed by the traditional beliefs in her society. Adah sees her husband-wife relationship as destructive and corruptive with the woman as a victim.” (67-68)

Adah started realizing that, her husband is selfish and really not a caretaker for her family. It makes Adah to protest against the male power subordinating the woman as second sex. Emecheta through Adah represents women as fundamentally strong, confident and brave. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir clearly observes, “one is not born but becomes a woman”. To free themselves from the clutches of patriarchy eliminate the classifications of sex and gender. Adah’s life in London makes a drastic change in her concept of family and the self-identity. She believes that it is her responsibility for raising up her children and not depending on her husband. This leads her to come out from the traditional African cultural beliefs. Then she said very loud and clear, “Don’t worry, sir. The children are mine and that is enough, I shall never let them down as long as I am alive” (191). In a chapter titled “woman as mother” Umeh tries to vindicate the authenticity of Adah. She writes:

“Adah is the long-suffering mother par excellence. She works herself to exhaustion as a cleaning woman to supplement the small allowance she receives from the dole in order to buy warm blankets and clothing for her children. There is no sacrifice Adah would not make for the benefit of her children...Without her children, life has no meaning.” (107)

In conclusion, Emecheta through her semi-autobiographical novel clearly making way for the African women to transform their traditional set of beliefs to consciousness of their own identity. As a novelist realistically dealing with the struggle for survival of black women in African society, Emecheta reminds Anita Desai, who sensitively presents female oppression and alienation in the post-colonial patriarchal society.

Works Consulted

- 1) Emecheta, Buchi. *Second-Class Citizen*. London: Fontana Books, 1977.
- 2) Brown, Lloyd. *Women Writers in Black Africa*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- 3) Umeh, Marie Arlene. *Women and Social Realism in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta*. Diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1981.

R. Rajasekar, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Annamalai University

Dr. C. Santhosh Kumar Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Annamalai University.