



THE THEME OF MARGINALITY AND APPROPRIATION IN THE NOVEL *SECOND CLASS CITIZEN* BY BUCHI EMECHETA

KRISHNAMURTI SANGITA K.

Ph. D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Reg. No. PP. ENG. 0119,
Rayalaseema University,
Kurnool (AP) INDIA

DR. ANNIE POTHEN,

Professor,
Department of English,
Nizam College,
Osmania University,
Hyderabad (TS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

All the commonwealth countries have gone through experience of colonialism and post-colonialism, which resulted in common social, political and economic problems. As a consequence, the literature that emerged from these countries has a unity of theme despite diverse sociological contexts. It is well-known fact that the impact of colonialism was extremely severe in the African countries. An effective presentation of the contemporary social and political problems is the primary task of the African writers. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Laurens Vander Post, Nadine Gordimer, Camara Laye are committed writers and all of them have powerfully presented the impact of colonialism and post colonialism of their country in their writings. The nineteen seventies have witnessed a significant development in the realm of African novels by women writers. The romanticized and distorted pictures of African women as found in the writings by the West were being replaced by more authentic voices.

INTRODUCTION

Racial discrimination, social status, empowerment of women and cultural conflict has deeply affected the lives of Black women writers particularly one of the most gifted and prolific of African women novelists, the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta. Buchi Emecheta, born in Lagos, Nigeria, is a sociology graduate from London with her five children. Her novels include *In the Ditch* (1973), *Second Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave*

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Girl(1977), *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Moonlight Bride*, *Naira Power*, *Destruction Biafra and Gwendolen*. In addition to her novels, her writings include radio and television plays, articles for journals and magazines. To her credit she also has a few children's books.

Emecheta's success as a novelist has evolved over the period of her creative history. She is an effective protest writer precisely because she has been increasingly successful in blending the rhetoric of impassioned protest with her mature talent. She focused on the real experience of her own life. One can visualize, through her writings, the depth of suffering in black women in African male dominated society. Emecheta distinctly portrays the traumatic images of reality through her writing. In acknowledgement of her marvelous talent she was given the Jack Campbell New Statesman Award for her novel *The Slave Girl*. *The Slave Girl* is a story of the sad plight of a girl sold into slavery by her own brother while *Second Class Citizen* is set in two continents, Africa and Europe. Emecheta's life as girl child in Nigeria / Lagos and after marriage the shift of place to pursue her dreams of independence and livelihood in London provide the saga of the second novel mentioned above.

Emecheta's novels depict the most exhaustive and moving portrayal of the African woman. Hers is an unparalleled portrayal of women in African fiction and has few equals in other literatures as well. The entire realm of African female experience can be found in her novels, from birth to death, with all the intermediate stages of child, adolescence, married woman and mother. Apart from the largeness in scope, Emecheta's account of African woman is an un-apologetically feminist one. She explores the psychological and physical toll of experiences such as arranged marriages, polygamy, perpetual pregnancy and childbirth as well as the trauma of widow. She champions the causes of women in every possible field, from home to the place of work. She focuses on how women are treated in terms of gender oriented margins. Emecheta makes an attempt through her writings to achieve a state of awareness and social change so that the female figures are no more the objects of marginality. Whereas the African women were burdened with symbolic, static role relegated to the margins of human activity in male-authored African fiction. Emecheta through her canonical writings brings women to the center stage. She creates a central space for women in all spheres of life: social, economic and political by an aggressive act of appropriation. An entirely new drama emerges as a result of this radical change in the writings by and about women and Emecheta is in the forefront leading a revolution in all perspectives of post-colonial African literature.

In the novels of Emecheta, the female characters have emerged from their cocoon, basking free to mixed reception of surprise and wonder. It is important in this regard to see Emecheta's technique in pitching her characters in familial, real life situations showing their unique reactions to the status quo. The central theme chosen by the novelist in almost all her



novels is woman, the feminine gender of the species of Homo sapiens. The handicap of the female is natal, according to her, just by the genetic accident of being born as a female child.

Education takes second place giving precedence to the institution of marriage in the life on an African woman. In this enclosed space, every woman is to fight for her survival as an individual and also overcome the cruel practice of marginality. The paradox of the institution of marriage lies in the fact that it is both sublimating and subsuming. Through this, a woman attains a status acclaimed by society and fulfils her biological needs of procreation and companionship. Through it too, the woman's place of second-rate citizen is emphasized. Often, quite easily, she is lost in the anonymity of male-defined roles in order to benefit the members of the household and make herself subservient to the needs of the household.

All this is depicted by the novelist through the character of Adah. In *Second Class Citizen* she is made to undergo all the travails of marriage and understand its true paradox starkly. She is married and so subsumed completely to her husband's people/family, her attention, her entire self.

The plight of Adah is worsened because she is estranged from her family. The reason for this is the non-payment of her bride price as is a customary practice in their Ibo society. But though the family clamour for the money and think that their daughter is a source of income for them even in her marriage, Adah's bride price of five hundred pounds is never paid to the chagrin of her family. Her case is particularly painful because she is an educated woman and so understandably would fetch more money. The bride price is central to the marriage transaction creating one more plank for the practice of exploitation and oppression against women, reducing them almost to the category of disposable objects. Under such circumstances Adah experiences powerlessness, which is one of the aspects of marginality. This brings about a sense of alienation in her. Since alienation is a term used to describe and explain a state of estrangement of the individual from the natural environment, social life or the self, Adah's situation can be described as any of these because she is uncomfortable in the natural environment into which she is born. Then her social estrangement is visible in her life amid the English and emigrants in London. She is also estranged from her family and her husband. But as far as her self is concerned she is not really uncomfortable as she has enough confidence in herself to face all situations and adversities. The feeling she has is that one's destiny is not under one's own control but is determined by external agents – fate, luck or institutional arrangements. The bride price still remains a token of the difference between genders as it is practiced by African society in the institution of marriage.

In spite of African women being relegated to the margins of society and family, Emecheta in *Second Class Citizen* places Adah at the center of both these areas as an educated woman in a modern setting first at the capital city of Lagos and later, far away in London metropolis.



Second Class Citizen, which is set in two continents, makes Adah, the model of womanhood striving to obliterate the negative gender differences and move out of its usual confining margins. As the novel describes part of Africa and a little part of London where Adah exercises her individuality and strives hard to establish her identity at the place of her work, we can read a strong vein of appropriation in the novel and in the character/situation of its protagonist. But these attempts play see-saw with her marginal treatment at home and the protagonist moves from one to the other every day of her married life.

Adah's role as a wife can be divided into two phases, her experiences in Lagos form the first phase, while her movement to London alter her experience of being a wife and therefore forms the second phase. In the first phase Adah had a traditional wifely role in a large family. But her move to London was for a dream relationship. She hoped that she would have an ideal marriage. For the first time, a Nigerian wife was tasting the real freedom of being a wife. She was free from the hindering influences of her kith and kin and society. She was free to work and earn money. Adah made all attempts to remove the margin, which confines the role of a wife. In her attempts unlike women in African Society, she is bold, courageous and positive in her thinking and in the practical application of her individual freedom. She overcomes and surpasses the phases of loneliness and alienation from the environment in which she lived in Nigeria and initially in London, as well. Emecheta develops this theme without equivocation or inconsistencies.

In African black society among the Ibo in particular, a girl was a little more than a piece of property. This is one of the first truths that Adah confronts. Yet, this realization serves not to intimidate her but to further steel her ambition to break out of her marginal cultural prison. She lead a path of struggle from education to marriage and ultimately to England, where she hopes to pursue her dreams of independence and success more easily.

Emecheta's protagonist does not embrace change without a backward glance nor does she remain so indelibly attached to her past that progress is impossible. She moves away from the margins of patriarchal society and asserts herself in all respects of life as a daughter, wife, mother and employee. This tentative attitude on the part of Emecheta's character represents the most important aspect of her writings. Adah is an embodiment in the means of empowerment for women who conforms and rebels, moves forward and adapts to inert in various situations of her existence.

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