
THE ORDEAL OF BLACKNESS AND WOMANHOOD IN EMECHETA'S *SECOND CLASS CITIZEN*¹

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Abstract

Many former-colonised authors “write back to the centre” following decolonisation by challenging and remodelling the texts about their nations. The Nigeria-born British author Buchi Emecheta is one of them. Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* revolves around Adah. The protagonist starts her arduous life by struggling against the patriarchal Igbo culture she is born into. Then, she encounters the racial discrimination in London where she accompanies with her husband, Francis, who represents patriarchy; thus, her ordeal is doubled as being both black and a woman in London.

In the novel, Emecheta draws a portrayal of her own life by means of Adah who achieves standing upon her feet as a black mother in the colonial society at last. She provides a way out for black women by means of the protagonist who manages to elude from the second-class position attributed to them by black men and the colonial society. Moreover, the author fills in the blanks left by colonialist authors. She also informs about the Nigerian people who had a culture with their religion, language and life style destroyed by colonisers.

Thus, the purpose of the study is to indicate how Emecheta abrogates and reappropriates in her autobiographical novel *Second Class Citizen*.

Keywords: Buchi Emecheta, Second Class Citizen, Abrogation, Reappropriation.

¹ This paper is an extended version of the conference paper, which was presented in ASOS Congress at Firat University in Elazığ on 14th October, 2016 with the title “Abrogation and Reappropriation in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*.”

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EMECHETA’NIN *SECOND CLASS CİTİZEN* ROMANINDA SİYAHİLİĞİN VE KADINLIĞIN ÇİLESİ

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Öz

Önceden sömürgeleştirilmiş bir çok yazar bağımsızlık sonrası kendi milletleri ile ilgili yazılanlara baş kaldırıp onları yeniden oluşturarak “merkeze doğru yazmaktadır.” Nijerya doğumlu İngiliz yazar Buchi Emecheta bunlardan biridir. Emecheta’nın *Second Class Citizen (İkinci Sınıf Vatandaş)* romanı; Adah etrafında döner. Baş kahraman zorlu yaşamına, doğduğu ataerkil Igbo kültürüne karşı mücadele ederek başlar. Daha sonra ise ataerkilliği temsil eden kocası Francis ile gittiği Londra’da ırksal ayrımcılıkla karşılaşır; böylece; kahramanın mücadelesi hem siyahi hem de kadın olarak Londra’da ikiye katlanır.

Eserde, Emecheta sömürgeci toplumda siyahi bir anne olarak sonunda kendi ayakları üzerinde durmayı başaran Adah karakteriyle kendi yaşamının bir portresini çizer. Yazar, siyahi erkekler ve sömürgeci toplum tarafından atfedilen ikinci sınıf konumundan sıyrılmayı başaran baş kahramanla siyahi kadınlara çıkış yolu sunar. Ayrıca, sömürgeci yazarlar tarafından kendi toplumuyla ilgili bırakılan boşlukları doldurur. Nijerya halkının dini, dili ve yaşam tarzıyla sömürgeciler tarafından yok edilen bir kültürü olduğunu da bildirir.

Bu çalışmanın amacı; Emecheta’nın *Second Class Citizen*’la ırk ve toplumsal cinsiyet ayrımcılığının üstesinden gelmeyi başaran siyahi bir kadın modeli oluşturarak sömürgeci eserlere karşılık yazdığını göstermektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Buchi Emecheta, İkinci Sınıf Vatandaş, Irk, Toplumsal Cinsiyet.

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) provides a way out to independence from all racist and sexist oppressions encountered by black women. In the novel, which displays the second-class position attributed to black women both by black men and white society, Emecheta portrays her central character as courageous, determined and capable of struggling against all hard conditions. By means of the main characters Adah and Francis in the novel, Emecheta also presents colonised immigrants' loss of self-respect and experiences of being homeless in Britain. The study aims to examine *Second Class Citizen*, which revolves around the protagonist Adah and asserts that the author puts a light from a black woman's perspective on her native culture which is excluded or degraded in colonial texts and draws attention to the fact that its bad sides were reinforced by the colonial impact. The study also indicates that the author emphasises the importance of education for black women by means of Adah who manages to stand upon her feet and achieve her ends in spite of all hardships.

Emecheta portrays her culture objectively by not abstaining herself from telling about its bad sides. Accordingly, Adah is told to be born to an African family and society in which even her date of birth is not recorded as she is a girl and has no place in her family and society (Emecheta, 1974, p.1). A patriarchal society such as African one practices gender discrimination and prescribes traditional roles to men and women according to their genders. Also, it is the womankind who suffers from gender discrimination. The third-person narrator of the novel introduces Adah by saying: "She was a girl who had arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting 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" (p. 1)³. The superiority of boys in African society over girls is not just limited at the time of birth but also in many situations of life such as in the field of education. For instance, Adah's parents think about her continuation of education in this way: "A year or two would do, as long as she can write her name and count. Then she will learn how to sew" (p. 3). It proves that "[m]arginalisation of African women by the traditional patriarchal society gives limited choices to them thereby suppressing the identity of womankind in the African society" (Bedana, 2014, p.33). However, Adah identifies her essence with confidence. She knows that she needs to educate herself to achieve her end. Her singular fight with her family to complete her education

³ Henceforward, the quotations without the name of the author belong to the work cited as follows: Emecheta, Buchi (1989). *Second-Class Citizen*. 1974. Great Britain: Hodder and Stoughton.

demonstrates her ambition and foresight. She starts struggling right from the time she is in the primary school; she is conscious of what she wants and works towards it with determination and courage. She knows that education is one of the things that can take her to her dream. It seems that education acts as a liberating force for Emecheta who says in an interview: "I always believe that given the Big E-Education-the position of women can be very positive...I believe that if you create a heroine, whether African or European, with education-not necessarily money, but education-she gains that confidence of being able to cope with the modern world" (Boss, 1988, p.96). It seems that education is only means for Adah to liberate herself from her sexist society.

Apart from the themes such as African women's roles in the patriarchal society, the subjugation and marginalisation of African women, and the clashes between tradition and modernity, the novel also presents black women's loss of identity in a foreign country. In the introduction of the novel, Emecheta states about Adah: "One could imagine her disappointment on arriving in Britain to learn that her colour was going to be a problem" (p. xi).

The Struggle Against Racial and Gender Discriminations in the Novel

Illuminating Emecheta's London experiences, the novel holds mirror to the experiences of immigrants when they cross the border leaving home for a new and alien country. In comparison to men, "[m]ore severely affected group of individuals due to migration are the women of African origin who leave the host country for the West in search of their great "American dreams", selfhood and liberty from traditional bindings" (Bedana, 2014, p.32). The great American Dream is one of the preoccupations of many youths from different countries through which their dreams of success and fame are met in the Western world like America. Adah gets married to Francis not because of her love, rather she rationalizes her hasty marriage to Francis by saying that all marriages are "a gamble" (p. 8), and then she confesses that she has dreamt of an early marriage to a rich man who will allow her mother and brother to come and stay with her in London (p. 20). In the introduction, Emecheta claims: "Stopping a young couple like Adah and Francis from going to England in those days was like condemning them to hell. Adah just had to visit this 'Kingdom of God' on Earth. So the subject of the book is both a young person's dream and a social reality" (p. viii). It is obvious that the couple are fascinated by the idealized vision of the West just like many other colonised people.

Francis is a student in London, which “must be like heaven” (p. 2) for Adah as she considers it as the place where she can realize her single desire: to be a writer. Thus, she dreams of going to the United Kingdom with Francis by getting rid of her sexist society: “she made a secret vow to herself that she would go to this United Kingdom one day. Her arrival there would be the pinnacle of her ambition” (p. 9). However, besides immigrant officials, she also encounters another authority in her way to London; Francis’ parents do not allow her to go. Gender discrimination against women symbolized by Francis and his father is depicted in Francis’ reaction to Adah’s desire of accompanying her husband to London. He says: “Father does not approve of women going to UK” (p. 24), because “[i]t is allowed for African males to come and get civilised in England. But that privilege has not been extended to females yet” (pp. 27-28). Because of his colonised mind combined with his sexist thoughts, he claims he is more privileged than Adah to be civilized in England. The plan is so: “He would go first, and Adah would send him twenty pounds every month; she was to save her fare and that of the children. She was to feed herself and the children whilst they were still in Lagos and pay the rent and help in paying the school fees of Francis’s seven sisters” (p. 27). However, the determined woman, Adah adopts the motto that “[b]e a cunning as a serpent, but as harmless as a dove” (p. 34) in her relationship with her parents in-law, and literally bribes her mother-in-law with her jewellery in order to obtain their permission to join Francis in Britain (p. 35). Her convincing method reveals that Francis’ mother also has the idealized image of foreign country as the place of realizing dreams. Adah says to her:

Think of it Ma. Francis in his big American car and I in my small one, coming to visit you and Pa when you retire. You’ll be the envy of all your friends. Mind you, in England I’ll still work and send you money. All you have to do is to ask, and then you’ll get whatever you want...I’ve almost finished reading for librarianship. All I have to do is to work, look after Francis and attend classes in the evening. And when I come back, I shall earn more than double what I’m earning now. (p. 35)

Adah makes use of Francis’ mother’s weakness about her dream of Europe and Europeans. Grown in the colonised town Ibuza, Adah observes the women of Ibuza who dye their hair, and straighten it with hot combs “to make it look European” (p. 2). Their desire to be just like Europeans in their appearances indicates that they are mimic-men. Adah understands well Francis’ mother by taking her own mother into consideration. Because just like her mother-in-law, Adah’s mother is not also educated, and she knows nothing but “the Ibo Bible and the Ibo Anglican hymn book, from the

Introduction to the Index” (p. 9) and she and her friends become “really happy were really happy to have their pictures taken by Europeans!” (p. 8) on the days before Nigerian independence when, the narrator says, “nearly every boat from England brought hundreds of English graduates and doctors to work in the schools and hospitals of Lagos” (p. 8). It can be claimed that Ibuza people’s eyes are extremely blinded by colonisers, and colonial impacts are in their whole lives. For instance, Adah’s father gets a job on the railway built by the Europeans in Lagos and marries Adah’s mother in an Anglican church, because many, like Adah’s father, are converted to Christianity (p. xi). As stated by the writer in the introduction, according to Adah’s father as one of the colonised people: “All his life, the United Kingdom had a kind of glamour for [him]. Nothing that came out of the UK was bad. English people were perfect, their clothes were spotless and to him their manners angelic. Even when he was conscripted into the British army he felt he was fighting for a right cause” (p. xi). Furthermore, whenever a new lawyer arrives from the United Kingdom, the residents consider him as a ‘Messiah’. For them, the narrator states: “A Messiah who would go into politics and fight for the rights of the people of Ibuza. A Messiah who would see to it that Ibuza would have electricity, that Ibuza would have a tarred road...” (p. 2). Thus, it is clear that the colonisers deceive them in a cunning way, by making them believe that everything will be better for the local people with the facilities they will provide them with.

Adah feels that there is an unwritten law applied upon Ibuza people. They go to the Church every Sunday, read the Bible and admire whatever the European men do. For instance, every Ibuza girl dreams of marrying a white man (p. 22). When Adah grows up, she goes to the Methodist Girls’ High School in Lagos, where she comes in contact with European missionaries (p. 7). The school is a colonial one and her uniform is like the British flag that underlines the fact that they are colonised from head to foot. She remembers: “It had a dark velvety background with pale blue drawings of feathers on it. The headscarf was red, and it was tied in such a way that it displayed their straightened hair” (p. 8).

Arriving in Britain, Adah discerns that she has run out of the frying pan into the fire by migrating to London. Following gender discrimination in Lagos, she faces both gender and racial discriminations bitterly in London. Francis reminds her that in comparison to their social status in Lagos, they are “second-class citizens” in London (p. 31). He says to Adah: “You see, accommodation is very short in London, especially for black people with children. Everybody is coming to London. The West Indians, the Pakistanis and even the Indians...We are all blacks, all coloured, and the only houses

we can get are horrors like these” (p. 29). It is obvious that life conditions are so hard for black immigrants in Britain. Francis is just a second-class citizen in London, however Adah has already been a second-class citizen as a woman in her hometown, and now she is doubly disadvantageous because of her colour as well as her gender. As bell hooks⁴ comments on the oppression and segregation of black women as compared to other community or group in the British society “[a]s a group, black women are in an unusual position in this society, for not only are collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group” (1984, p.14). It is Francis, who reminds Adah of her permanent second-class position in Britain by saying to her: “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 breast-feed her baby” (p. 145). Although he is also black, Francis, as a man, is more advantageous than Adah.

Emecheta states in the introduction of the novel: “It [The novel] had to describe the experience of young African families, uprooted from their own culture to the one they encountered in Britain. The ‘conflict of culture’ part of the book arose because I was still a sociology student” (p. viii). It is observed in the novel that Adah’s romantic and idealistic vision of the United Kingdom and British people turns upside down. She has a new vision now: “England is a silent country; people are taught to bottle up their feelings and screw them up tight, like the illicit gin her parents drank at home. If you made a mistake and uncorked the bottle, the gin would bubble out” (p. 83). She faces real England tolerating nothing rebellious or out of the drawn line, hiding her people’s sufferings below the surface and embodying a supreme power over any other races. Also, in contrast to the white people whom she has idealized just like any other Ibuza girls, Adah encounters British people who are “remote, happy in aloof way, but determined to keep their distance” (p. 27).

Because of Francis’ and Adah’s colour, they face racism in many situations such as in hiring their baby-sitter, in renting an apartment, and in giving job interviews. Adah feels racism sharply when she finds that her sick son Vicky is being taken to a hospital named “Royal Free” hospital. The name of the

⁴ bell hooks (1952-) is an American feminist author who does not capitalize her first name and surname deliberately. As its reason, she says in an interview: “ ‘bell hooks’ is my maternal great grandmother—to honor them and debunk the notion that we were these unique, exceptional women. We [black feminists] wanted to say, actually, we [women] were the products of the women who'd gone before us” (<http://www.commonstruggle.org>).

hospital is ironic, since it appears as though the treatment it provides is “royal” and still “free” of charge. The narrator says: “Was it a hospital for poor people, for second-class people? Why did they put the word „free“ in it? Fear started to shroud her then. Were they sending her Vicky to a Second Class hospital, a free one, just because they were blacks?” (p. 60). However, Adah realises that they are not sympathised as they are black immigrants, contrarily, they are precluded even from the health facilities because of the same reason.

Furthermore, for Adah, getting married to Francis who is “an African through and through” (p. 19) refers to marrying patriarchy. At the beginning, she is not aware of the fact that she takes the patriarchal traditions and customs with her to Britain, when she accompanies Francis. She observes the superficial changes in Francis in London. She thinks: “The Francis that came to meet was a new Francis” (p. 27) with his European clothes, and his kissing Adah outside makes her embarrassed (p. 27). It is clear that after the cultural shock, Francis attempts to adapt himself to a new culture, which he cannot internalise. Thus, it is obvious that he has become a mimic man just like many other Nigerian people who try to imitate British colonisers in Ibuza. He also wants his children to speak only in English. For Adah, it results from “the fact that Nigeria was ruled for so long a time by the English. An intelligent man was judged by the way he spoke English” (p. 43). Therefore, it is obvious that he only maintains his colonised identity.

Adah then realises that Francis is the Nigerian Francis, as usual. It is so obvious in his segregation among his children regarding their genders. According to him, their daughter Vicky is “only a girl” (p. 51), whereas Adah says: “What do you mean by “only a girl”? She is a person, too, you know, just like your son” (p. 51). Adah understands that his ideas about women are still the same (p. 142). Their being away from Lagos does not change Adah’s second-class position as a woman at home, as well. Her attributed gender roles never leave her. According to Francis, the place where a woman must be is her house where she is supposed to obey her husband and feed her children (p. 28). Also, he, just like all Ibuza people, considers procreation as the main responsibility of the woman in a marriage. That is why Francis’ parents like Adah: “A woman would be forgiven everything as long as she produce children” (p. 28). Furthermore, if there is a quarrel between the husband and his wife, the wife will be the one to beg for her husband’s forgiveness even if the husband is at fault, because it is traditionally believed that “[m]en 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” (p. 45).

Continuing dealing with gender discrimination at home, Adah experiences both sexist and racist oppression outside. In her attempts to adapt herself to the British life, Adah is made to internalise the inferiority of her colour. While searching for house to rent, she finds out that almost all the notices have ‘Sorry, no coloureds’ on them (p. 59). She wishes they could paint their faces until the first rent (p. 64). As claimed by Victoria U. Ola (1987), Emecheta’s vision of London embraces her own trials and those of other women in similar situations, for she realises that women of all races and national backgrounds share the humiliations and hardships that flow from the double handicap of being poor and female in London (p. 137). The narrator tells about Adah’s colleagues in the library: “The other girls were assistants, very young with long, skinny legs; most of them seemed to be all legs to Adah. Unlike their superior, so she never really became too familiar with them. They made her feel inferior somehow, always talking of boy-friends and clothes” (p. 35). She considers herself to be ugly and inferior among them. She experiences the impacts of binary opposition in terms of her race and observes that British people associate black colour with all negative connotations. For instance, in Britain people’s concerning their baby-sitters to be white rather than black makes her conclude that “[t]he concept of ‘whiteness’ could cover a multitude of sins” (p. 36). Therefore, she becomes “conditioned to expect inferior things” (p. 64) as she realises that being black means being inferior and her colour is something she is supposed to be ashamed of (p. 59). She questions the teachings of the Bible that says all believers are brothers and sisters and she wonders whether “God really said all that” (p. 85). Upon witnessing the misbehaviours of white people, she feels that she destroys one of the myths she has been brought up to believe: the white man never lies (p. 43). She thinks: “...the whites were just as fallible as everyone else. There were bad whites and good whites, just as there were bad blacks and good blacks! Why, then, did they claim to be superior?” (p. 43). Thus, her observation and questioning make her aware of the fact that just like many other Nigerian people, she has also been mistaken with the idea that white people are always superior to black ones in very field of life.

As time passes, she cures her damaged self-respect. She finds the root of the problem and accuses her own Nigerian leaders of enforcing inferiority of the Nigerian people: “Maybe if the blacks could learn to live harmoniously with one another, maybe if a West Indian landlord could learn not to look down on the African, and the African learn to boast less of his country’s natural wealth, there would be fewer inferiority feelings among blacks” (p. 59). While reading the black writer, James Baldwin (1924-1987), she feels that

black is beautiful and asks her British librarian friend Bill about it. She feels happy and becomes proud of her colour when he replies “Do you not know that black is beautiful?” (p. 131). She also asks Francis to bring her a cloth “one with ‘Nigerian Independence, 1960’ written all over it” (p. 106). She wants to show the people around herself that she comes from Nigeria and it is an independent republic (p. 106). Thus, her recovered self-respect helps Adah reconstruct her identity as an immigrant who is not ashamed, but proud of her race and country.

In her struggle against gender discrimination, she also realises that her Western education endorses the patriarchal teaching in her own society. The narrator says: “Those God-forsaken missionaries! They had taught Adah all the niceties of life, they taught her by the Bible, where a woman was supposed to be ready to give in to her man at any time” (p. 20). She has been taught by the Bible, as Francis reminds her, that: “she was called ‘wo-man’ because she was made from the ribs of a man, like himself. It made sense when he was talking, ‘woman’ being an English word which may be regarded as a compound word, ‘wo’ and ‘man’ (p. 84). Thus, she feels herself obliged to dedicate herself to her husband both financially and sexually. She pays “for Francis’s course, his examination fees, buy[s] his books” (p. 62) and she is bound to satisfy her husband in any conditions in the bed, it is stated that, otherwise, “how could she protest to a man who was past reasoning! The whole process was an attack, almost a rape as savage as that of any animal” (p. 43). For him, Francis is “only good at giving her children, nothing else!” (p. 46). Family planning cap without the husband’s consent is an abomination in the African culture. Francis also believes that it will enable Adah to have sexual relationships with other men: “Did Adah not know the gravity of what she had done? It meant she could take other men behind his back...How the innocent Adah who came to London a year previously had become so clever (p. 160). Adah thinks of Francis as a “second-class human to be slept with at any time, even during the day” (p. 181), and if she refuses him, she is beaten until she gives up resisting. As a wise woman, Adah takes the advantage of Francis’ desire for her and talks to him so that they can go and see the nobles concerning accommodation, she chooses the time when he wants her in the bed: “She made sure she chose the right moment. These moments were usually when Francis was pressed with desire for her. She would encourage him to work himself up...Then Francis went on pleading like a fool...She might as well give into him, now, otherwise it would result into blows” (p. 95).

In addition, it is not acceptable for a woman to earn much more than her husband. Francis does not want her to work and thinks: “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” (p. 26). In fact, because of his patriarchal background, he is afraid that she will become an independent woman who does not have to ask him for his support or opinion before delving into any task, because according to him woman is weak and supposed to remain so. This is the reason why Francis hates Adah for being independent financially. Adah is also the only one over whom he can dominate in Britain. His feeling of being suppressed outside turns out to be his desire for oppressing over Adah. He does not want her to become intellectually free, as well. Therefore, he tries to kill her spirit of becoming a writer by burning her first manuscript of “Bride Price”, a short story that she has tried to write amidst her heavy duty towards family, work and under high racism. This becomes “the last straw” for Adah (p. 147). Adah starts going against Francis, because she realizes that he does not care for her but only for himself. Thus, she questions: “Was it necessary to have a husband brought into an issue like that? Could not the woman be given the opportunity at exercising her own will?” (p. 155). This is a kind of awakening process for her.

She tries to make herself free from the dependence on her husband and make her own life, have her own point of view, independent of her husband. At the end of it all, she struggles against the dominance and wins herself from her uncaring selfish husband. When he denies her and her five children, she takes responsibility and looks after her children as she makes money as a librarian, thus, shows that women can be more responsible than men if given the chance. Then she says loudly: “Don’t worry, sir. The children are mine and that is enough, I shall never let them down as long as I am alive” (p. 191). Thus, even though Adah’s marriage fails, the writer empowers her protagonist to assert herself through education and self-determination. As stated by Bedana, following a constant fight against gender and racial discriminations, Adah embraces an identity, which allows her to have voice as a writer (p. 35). Her determination takes her to where she wants to be.

Conclusion

Emecheta, in *Second Class Citizen*, gives an account of the hardships of being both black and woman in colonised’s and coloniser’s lands by drawing attention to the colonial impacts on colonial subjects from the eyes of a black woman. She creates a courageous and wise woman, Adah, who experiences many oppressions in Africa and Britain, however, then overpasses gender and racial boundaries by taking motive from her education. In this regard, it can be inferred that through her protagonist, Emecheta sets a model for black women, who set out to free themselves not only from traditional bindings of

their native culture but also a variety of oppressive forces they face in colonial country.

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