



SELECTED NOVELS OF BUCHI EMECHETA

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Abstract: Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria on July, 1944. She immigrated to London, England in 1960. She received a Sociology degree at the University of London. She worked as a social worker for a number of years and contributed a column to the new statesmen about black British life. She wrote 20 novels during her lifetime including *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Rape of Shavi*, *Second Class Citizen*, *Into the Ditch*, *The Bride Price* and *The New Tribe*, *Double Yoke*, *Kehindle*, *Destination Biafra* and *Gwendolen* etc. Her first play, *A Kind of Marriage* was screened on BBC TV in 1976 and was entitled *Head above Water*. In 2005, she was made an OBE for services to literature.

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Introduction:

African women writers have been publishing books for almost as long as male writers. Literary critics have more or less remained disinterested in their works. Many female African writers have contributed for the sake of African women's neglect in throughout the decades and their works pushed aside to make way for the works of the male writers. Many women writers from Africa had written works from 1970s to 1900s. Grace Ogot (1930-2015), Flora Nwapa (1931-1993), Bessie Head (1937- 1986), Adaora Lily Ulasi (1932). Bessie Head deals with issues of racism and gender discrimination and her works are powerful descriptions of African men and women in the face of change in political circumstances of South Africa. More recently women writers include Noviolet Bulewayo (1981) from Zimbabwe who was shortlisted for 2013 Man Booker Prize for her novel 'Ne Need New Names'(2013). The Institution of polygamy is considered as a social necessity in the Igbo setting. However, it reduces women to mere acquisitions who exist for the benefit of the man. The writers named Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have projected Nigeria in their novels. While describing Nigeria, they focused on the customs, oral traditions, folklores, social, cultural, political and economical issues of Nigerian people. They also illustrated post-colonial conditions through their novels.

Through her works Buchi Emecheta throws light on various themes related to African women's struggle for freedom and identity. For the sake of their rights, they fight against this oppression and want freedom from the patriarchal dominance. So, identity is an important part of black women's literature. Race, gender, and ethnicity are all components of one's identity. Buchi Emecheta is also the author of several novels for children including *Nowhere to Play* (1980) and *The Moonlight Bride* (1980). She published a volume of autobiography, *Head above Water*, in 1980. Her television play, *A Kind of Marriage*, was first screened by the BBC in 1976.

Analysis:

The Oxford Dictionaries define the terms "identity" and "home" as "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is" and "the place where one live permanently especially as a member of a family or a household" [3]. A person is able to identify himself completely when he is in his home. It means that the chance of feeling the sense of belongingness is much higher when the individual is at home. Buchi Emecheta as a diasporic writer writes about the experiences of a black woman Adah Obi in the United Kingdom which is more of Emecheta herself.

Buchi Emecheta was born in Yaba near Lagos in Nigeria on July 21, 1944. She married early in life at the age of sixteen to Sylvester Onwordi, a student. Soon they moved to London for Onwordi's education

and in the course of six years of their marriage, Emecheta gave birth to five children. Emecheta was the only breadwinner of the family and supported her husband and children financially. To severe the condition, she struggled against racism from the white man's country as well as sexism from the traditional African patriarchal society. The novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) is a record of her experiences and struggles of life through the fictional character of Adah Obi which is the alter ego of Emecheta herself in the 1960s at the backdrop of racism in the United Kingdom. The novel being one of her semi-autobiographical novels, the London experience of Emecheta's life is embedded in the novel. The novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) is about a story of development of Adah Obi, the protagonist, from girlhood in Lagos to womanhood in London. As the African society is a patriarchal one, men are privileged while women are oppressed. It means to say that African society practices gender discrimination and prescribe traditional roles to men and women according to their gender. And it is the womankind who suffers in this sexism. The first problem of identity in the novel arises when the African culture fails to recognise and identify a girl child as an "individual" right from her birth. As for example, Emecheta shows the insignificance of Adah's birth in her family:

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)

The preference 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. To quote Emecheta on the doubt of Adah's parents over her continuation of education: 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)

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 west like America. Likewise Adah also dreamt of going to the United Kingdom in order to fulfil her dream in the west: (. . .) 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.11)

Born of a lesser sex, Adah is deprived of education and other facilities while everything went in favour of her younger brother Boy. Adah has to struggle right from the beginning of her life. Her father dies early and so she is taken to her uncle's house where she lives with her mother. She is tutored only to be a good wife and not to be a woman of her own will.

All she is allowed to know is the responsibilities of a woman in the house and family. Adah has to marry out of compulsion to Francis, student studying accounts, because she has no place to live and continue her studies. Marginalisation of African women by the traditional patriarchal society gives limited choices to them thereby suppressing the identity of womankind in the African society. African women are exposed to limited space wherein they have to perform their traditional roles as a wife and as a mother. They are supposed to engage their lives in domesticity. Sexism of women is held strictly by male chauvinists symbolized by Francis and his father. Francis's reaction to Adah's desire of accompanying her husband to London: Father does not approve of women going to UK. (p.24) It is allowed for African males to come and get civilised in England. But that privilege has not been extended to females yet. (p.34) The hardship of living under the extreme racism occurs once Adah arrives at London. Francis reminds her that despite their respectable social status in Lagos, they are "second-class citizens" in London. Black people as a racial group struggle against all kinds of discrimination and marginalisation in order to claim their identity which was quite difficult in fact impossible in a white man's country. Adah faces a shocking truth about London when her husband explains the difficulty of accommodation in London: You see, accommodation is very short in London, especially for black people with children. (p.34) A black woman faces much more marginalisation than a black man which Emecheta exposes in the course of the novel. The double marginalisation of black woman takes place in two ways. At first, women are marginalised in Africa because of their gender. They occupy the lowest rank in their society. And so women are not allowed to take any major decision in or outside the family. And secondly, in the west countries like America or London, black women are marginalised for being a Black. The notion of double marginalisation of black women is well expressed by Emecheta in the novel. In this regard, bell hooks' comments on the oppression and segregation of black women as compared to other community or group in the society is significant: As 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. [4] It shows that black women are marginalised more than any other group of people in western countries and in elsewhere. They are not only at the bottom of the social hierarchy but also negative stereotypes are attributed to them. As feminism sought for equal rights of women as men in the social, political and economical arena, Black Feminism is an

ideology which deals with the issues of women of color. The movement is set against the

Francis and Adah face racism in many situations such as in hiring their baby-sitter, in renting an apartment, in giving job interviews etc. The height of racism becomes unbearable when Adah finds that her sick son Vicky is being taken to a hospital named "Royal Free" hospital. The name of the hospital is ironic since it appears that the treatment they are going to give is "royal" and still "free" of charge. Adah doesn't swallow this and doubts about the hospital's neglected treatment towards her son. She wonders if the hospital is just meant for second-class people, the blacks: 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)

As apparent from her interviews and her own life, Emecheta rejects a marriage which is unhappy and demands of women to leave such marriage. One can find the protagonist of the novel in Second-Class Citizen leaving her husband who is neither supportive nor loving. In the end, Adah embraces "divorce" which in her culture, is not encouraged among married women. With the exposure to two different cultures, one traditional and one western, Adah opted to choose the best of both worlds. Margaret A. Cox appropriately concludes on the major women characters of Emecheta's novels: Ona, Nko, Adah and Kehinde, four women who have a stake in the claim of autonomy, decide whether they will obtain their inheritance as daughters of their people, as mother of their people, or as women in their own right, aside from their people. With two different cultures-one Igbo, one Western, should they choose the values of one over the other? Or should they take the best aspects of both and define their own identities? [10]

Most of the women protagonists of Emecheta's novels either succumb to traditional patriarchal norms as victims or emerge as survivor against all odds. She lends voice to her characters through education and selfdetermination. In Second-Class Citizen also, the protagonist succeeds in recovering her lost identity and home caused by the traditional stereotyping of African woman, social alienation of being a Black and dislocation due to migration in a white man's country. To quote Anu Baisel in regard to Adah's emergence as a survivor: In Buchi's Second-Class Citizen, from the long-going on war Adah gets out as the winner. She becomes successful in her fight with the outside world and makes England her home and thus gains her identity. So in the immigrant experience it is the woman who succeeds finding a place of belonging, a real home and building a secure sense of self-identity. [11]

Adah's western education and her employment as a Librarian in the American Consulate Library at Campbell Street in London opens a way to a new life as a promising writer even though she struggles with her four children and another child in her womb. She takes charge of her own life as well as her children's singlehandedly in a white man's country. The journey towards a new identity in a new home can be said to begin for her at the end of the novel which has given the true meaning of her existence.

Conclusion

The present paper has explored the protagonist's quest for identity and home in Buchi Emecheta's novel Second-Class Citizen born out of the sense of dislocation, sexism and racism. At first Adah rejects the prevailing culture and lifestyle of England. She is socially as well as culturally alienated in the new country. However, she gradually gets adapted to the new culture which gives birth to a new life of a promising writer at the backdrop of sexism as well as racism. What Emecheta tries to bring home the message in the novel is that despite the fact that African women are marginalized for being a woman and a Black in a white man's country like the United Kingdom, she can still be identified as a writer utilising the creative gifts endowed to her. As for the "home", like the protagonist in the novel, every African woman needs love; security and economic independence to feel at home. Even though Adah's marriage fails, Emecheta empowers her protagonist to assert herself through education and self determination. To conclude, Emecheta's protagonist after a constant fight against sexism and racism, embraces an identity which allowed her to voice as a writer and welcomes a second home in England which gave freedom from traditional patriarchal oppression and stereotyping of African women.

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