

Search for Identity and Home in Buchi Emecheta's novel *Second-Class Citizen*.

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Abstract: *Buchi Emecheta is one of the eminent women writers from Nigeria writing about the issues of African women's roles in the patriarchal society, the subjugation and marginalisation of African women and the clashes between tradition and modernity. Apart from these themes, the loss of identity of black women in foreign country like the United Kingdom is another recurring theme. In trying to acclimatize to the new rules, new ways of life, people, culture and environment, an emigrant finds herself torn between homelessness and alienation. The present paper is an attempt to explore how Buchi Emecheta has represented the experience and cause of being homeless and the loss of identity of the self through the central character of Adah Obi in the novel *Second-Class Citizen* (1974). Overall, the paper will provide an invigorating and incisive analysis of the different degrees of experiences of migrants when one crosses the border leaving home for a new and alien country.*

Keywords: *black women, homelessness, identity, marginalization, migrants.*

I. Introduction

A person or individual is known by his or her identity through various aspects such as name of the person, country, class, culture, religion, way of lifestyle, gender, profession etc. With the help of these aspects; an individual is identified in the society. However, when the individual faces struggle in living his life, he is unable to identify himself with the country or culture he is living with. And due to this crisis of identity, he searches for his "home" where he can develop as an individual, find a stable life and bring a balance between his wishes and the culture and tradition of his land. In the context of a female individual, the reason for the loss of identity of a woman is due to the fact that her identity is overshadowed by the presence of male individuals who possess the supreme power and position in every patriarchal society. Women are generally identified in connection with male members such as father, husband, son, uncle etc. and not by her own name or profession. Woman is the "other" of man. And this notion of "otherness" is a socially constructed one as Simone de Beauvoir had aptly remarked:

One is not born, a woman rather becomes, a woman. [1]

The effect of migration on individuals is severe when they are not treated properly and equally by the host country. Such effect leads to psychological, sociological and economic breakdown of the migrants. The experiences of such migrants living outside their countries are often reflected in literature such as in the form of a fiction or poetry. As for example, African writers as well as African-American writers reflect upon the lives and experiences of migrants living in London or America. More 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. In this context, the present paper attempts to analyse the novel, *Second-Class Citizen* (1974)[2] written by the African woman novelist Buchi Emecheta in which the issues of migration, search for identity and home through the protagonist's life and experiences in an alien country like the United Kingdom are reflected upon.

II. 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 lives 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 sever 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

oppression of women of color by sexism and racism. Delores P. Aldridge remarks the arena of Black Feminism as:

Black Feminism focuses on the experiences, needs, and desires of women of colour. [5]

Citing the purpose of Black Feminism, Clenora Hudson-Weems affirms that:

The goal of Black Feminism is to create a criterion by which women of colour can assess their realities, both in thought and in action. [6]

Since Emecheta writes about African women issues in her novels demanding equal rights with the African men many critics label her as a “feminist”. However, Emecheta defends herself from such label and associates herself with a kind of Black feminism known as “Womanism”. Some of the excerpts from her interviews in which Emecheta resents on being called a “feminist”:

I am a feminist with a small “F”. I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital “F”(Feminist) woman who says women should live together and all that, I say NO! Personally I’d like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if it doesn’t work, for goodness sake, call it off. [7]

She states in another interview in 1986:

I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f. (ibid.)

Emecheta gives her own reason of why she refused to be called a “feminist” in a 1989 interview:

I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that. . . I don’t like being defined by them. . . It is just that it comes from outside and I don’t like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it Womanism, because you see, you Europeans don’t worry about water, you don’t worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land, and I say, ‘Okay, I can’t build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting’. This is my brand of feminism. (ibid.)

The second-class treatment towards black people holds an important place in the context of the novel. Both 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)

One of the key elements which Emecheta frequently makes emphasis on in her novels is the need for education of women and which is again visible in this novel. The ability to face adversities in life is provided by the knowledge that comes from education. In short, it empowers women. In an interview conducted by Joyce Boss with Emecheta in 1987, Emecheta talks about the role and importance of education:

(. . .) I always believe that given the Big E—Education—the position of women can be very positive. [8]

(. . .) 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. (ibid.)

It is the exposure to western education that Adah Obi matures as an educated woman and develops the art of writing. She find herself free time to write a short story amidst her heavy duty towards family, work and under high racism. However her abusive husband Francis kills her spirit of becoming a writer when he burns the first manuscript of “Bride Price”. Despite of all such unsupportive actions and domestic violence Adah Obi still holds on to her dream of becoming a writer. With the courage and knowledge which Adah develops out of her education, she finally gives divorce to her tormenting husband. The sole purpose of Emecheta’s writings to educate womankind and set themselves free from the traditional bindings especially African women from various oppressive forces such as sexism and racism is evident from the messages present in the novel. As a woman writer, she feels the need to instil a realization in women especially that the long silenced voices of women can be heard and a time has arrived for women to remove the social stigma attached to women in every patriarchal society. Cynthia Ward reviews Emecheta’s novels as under:

[Emecheta’s] novels represent the experience of the African woman struggling to assert her self against historically determined insignificance, a self constituted through the suffering of nearly every form of

oppression-racial, sexual, colonial that human society has created, a self that must find its true voice in order to speak not only for itself but for all others similarly oppressed. [9]

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 self-determination. 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 single-handedly 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.

III. 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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