

Resistance and Reconstruction in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*

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Abstract

The contemporary women writers of the world are preoccupied with exposing the various reasons behind the gender subjugation even after the emergence of scientific growth, which, undoubtedly, has abolished many irrational beliefs of human beings. The women literary writers and critics have formed a lot number of feminist schools. These writers have the common opinion that women are not given fair treatment by the social frame work of any country. At the beginning stage, the women felt their absence in politics; hence they fought for the equality in politics. Later, they felt the mere political equality is not enough to make sure of women's emancipation. So that, they started to be obsessed with their economic dependency on men. Further, they assumed that the economic independence would provide what they had expected. Some of the revolutionary women of the twentieth century avowed that women are marginalized mainly because of the deep rooted psychology of human beings. Simone De Beauvoir is a fine example for this type of women writers. According to them sensibility of women is purely an external force, which affects the entire social structure as that is obviously biased. The modern women writers have got one more conviction that the biological difference between men and women is the basic reason for all sorts of sufferings of the women right from their civilization. These writers consider the process of civilization as a curse upon women, because many layers of invisible webs have been created. These webs have been disguised as tradition and culture. No society is exceptional for this matter.

The post-colonial novels of women writers have been delineating the predicaments of women. They have started to suggest their gender to move away from the dangers caused by patriarchy. Their opinions are either cunning or radical in their nature. However, they concentrate the political, economic, social, psychological and biological sides in order to exhibit

the real survival of women on the planet called, the earth. Comparing the white women, 'the other' women have been struggling more to make sure of their survival, because they live in a country, where the nature of tradition and culture are stern enough to check the tolerance of the second sex. This is the reason why, the women writers of the Third World Countries have negated the main stream of the feminist discourse. Further, they tend to formulate a new type of discourse pertaining to their cultural framework. The women writers of these countries are fond of socialist realism and felt realism to explicate the atrocities found in their respective societies. This insinuates the fact that their novels are not meant for entertainment; rather, they are semi-documentaries, which have the intention of showing their broken hearts due to the presence of the excessive gender partiality.

The African women writers have been announcing the pervasive racial and gender discrimination, that they experience, to the world. English, being the global language of the contemporary period, is instrumental in disseminating their profound thoughts regarding the act of subjugation of women. Buchi Emecheta is one among the African women writers. Her writings have been exposing the social evils of her society. As a conscious writer of the post-colonial era, she tends to discover the various reasons behind the outcast of the African society. She has written a many number of novels. *Second Class Citizen*, *The Joy of Motherhood*, *The Slave Girl* and *Bride Price* are popular enough to receive the attention from the world readers. The present study is an attempt of unfurling Buchi Emecheta's conceptual framework of gender issues with the special reference of her novel *Second Class Citizen*, which presents an audacious woman character as a counterpart of the harmful patriarchy.

Second Class Citizen is a novel, which is filled with auto-biographical elements. Hence, it is essential to know a few important facts regarding Buchi Emecheta's life in order to explicate the novel effectively. She was born in Logo on 21st July 1944. Her parents were attached with Igbo culture. As her father was working in railways, her family members did not starve like the other people of the society. Right from her childhood days, her thrust for economic independence is seemingly present. Her longing for good education was the manifestation of her desire for good economy. It was not easy to pursue her education as her social environment was not conducive to her getting it. The people of her community were of the opinion that girls should not be given education. However, she prevailed over her parents and joined in a school. There she received a full scholarship to Methodist school. At the age of sixteen she was married

to an extravagant lavish, Sylvester Onwardi. Then she went to London in search of good education and economy with her husband. There she gave birth to five children. Her relationship with him was not smooth, but she was affectionate towards her children. She struggled a lot in London, where she wanted to prove her independent economic status to her husband and to the African society. Her struggles are recorded in her autobiographies *In the Ditch* and *Second Class Citizen*.

The premise of Buchi Emecheta's writings is exposing the irrational African behavioral conceptual framework that women are secondary. The novel *Second Class Citizen* highlights the same. The novelist is indignant that her society fails to record a girl's birth while a boy's is highly celebrated. This comes into light when she describes the reaction of Adah's parents in *Second Class Citizen*. They feel the presence of Adah, the protagonist of the novel, insignificant:

She was not even quite sure that she was exactly eight, because, you see, she was a girl. She was a girl who arrived when everyone 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. (*SCC* 3)

Second Class Citizen narrates the story of Adah, a revolutionary girl of the African society. Her story resembles the biographical details of the novelist. Through this novel, Emecheta seems to suggest her gender to break the abstract concepts of tradition and culture. She is of the conviction that the women of Africa, by doing that, can emancipate their gender. This concept is explicated in *Second Class Citizen*, which is selected for this present study. The novelist laments for the absence of female bonding in her social ambience. This lack of attachment takes place, she reckons, due to, the women's illiteracy. This can be understood when the motherly attitude of Adah, who is educated, is juxtaposed with the mothers in *The Joy of Motherhood*. Nnu-ego, the protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood* is also sensitive enough to protect her children. But she is not conscious of the fact that girl's education can bring them enough freedom and emancipation. Adah, on the other hand is very much aware of the importance of education to her gender. By creating these two opposite characters, the novelist advocates women's education.

Adah is instrumental to Emecheta in explaining the possible ways, by which a woman can get rid of the existing slavery. Adah's preoccupation is getting good education. She is ready

to bear any sort of pain to achieve that. Because, she knows very well the education she aspires can fulfill the needs of her future. Her predicament for getting good education is deteriorated whenever she is expected to pay for her studies. Emecheta provides an example to exhibit the audacity of Adah. She hides the money given by her cousin for buying something and she pays it for her education. For this, she receives corporal punishment. But, this does not affect her after some extent as she knows well that this sort of pain must be tolerated in order to achieve her goal. By exploring the high amount of the tolerance in Adah, the novelist tends to send a message to her readers that the African girls are able to bear pain as their social ambience itself is painful to cope with. Hence, the corporal punishment is an extension of that sort of tolerance: “after a hundred and three strokes... Adah did not mind, she says in fact, very happy. She had earned two shillings” (23).

Buchi Emecheta does not want to break the rules and regulations of her society. In fact, the novel *The Slave Girl* tends to create the impression that she loves her cultural frame work. The protagonist of *Second Class Citizen* cannot tolerate the absence of a cultural object in her. This implies the deep-rooted culture in the women of the African countries. Being one among the African women, Emecheta aspires to be emancipated without creating too much of damage to her society’s tradition and culture. Her intention is clear that the women must use the possible opportunities found in the society to achieve what they aspire. Her intention is evident through her character Adah, who is very conscious about her bride groom. She is excited knowing that her marriage with the young man would provide her the opportunity for visiting U.K., her dream land.

Buchi Emecheta tends to persuade her readers that the women of her society are smarter than their opposite sex. To explicate this notion, she compares the intellectual faculty of Adah and Francis, her husband. Adah is able to earn more than her husband in the U.K. Consequently, Francis has developed inferiority complex. The African society’s notion that a woman should not earn by herself, aggravates his lack of mental equilibrium. Instead of being happy about the possible economic development through his wife’s income he regrets: “Do you think our marriage will be lost 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, instead of protesting against her man, tries to make use of his weakness. She is preoccupied with the financial development of her career. She is expected to get permissions

from her man for each and every move she makes to achieve her ultimate goal. Her awareness about Francis' weakness in sexuality provides her needs. Her decision of going for a job must be approved by him; otherwise she cannot fulfill her own aspiration for the good economy. Her prevailing upon him is successful as she selects the right time to speak to him:

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. (95)

Adah is not too passive in her resistance. She tolerates all kinds of pains from her social environment to achieve her expected economic status. Her passive resistance becomes active when she makes sure that she can stand alone with the help of a job. Even though, she is not willing to break her relationship with her husband, his atrocities urge her to do the same. Eventually, she does not bother about her man's position without her financial help. She abandons him for he is not conscious of the familial responsibilities. But her problems connecting with lack of good economy continues as she has to take care of all her children. At one stage she starves a lot due to insufficient economy. Eventually, she is able to make sure of a prosperous job to meet her needs. Adah's behavioral concept of culture seems to be complex. Her attitude is not static to hold the cultural values. The early part of the novel provides the impression that she is a typical African woman, having too much of faith in tradition and culture. The latter part, on the other hand, displays her rebel against the African cultural structures. By doing this, novelist seems to send the message to her fellow women that having too much of faith in the concept of culture is not going to be constructive; rather, it is destructive to women's lives. The novelist's socialist feminist stand, which is present in the first part of the novel, moves towards radical feminist stand in the latter part of the novel.

Buchi Emecheta, in *Second Class Citizen*, has delineated the racial discrimination too. Adah's life in the racist society does provide her the prosperous economy, but her emotional faculty is highly affected there. The novelist feels it a curse upon the protagonist: "It is a curse to be an orphan, a double curse to be a black one. In a white country, an unforgivable calamity to be a woman with five kids without a husband" (16). Even though, Adah suffers due to racial discrimination, she is able to survive there. The life she had lead once in her native country is not fruitful comparing her survival in the U.K. However, *Second Class Citizen* exposes the

novelist's suggestions for getting rid of the dangers caused by culture and tradition of the African society. Further, the move from slavery to emancipation is also visible in the revolutionary novel.

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