

NOVELS OF BUCHI EMECHETA AND WOMEN DISCRIMINATION

Anjali Mishra

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ram Singh Mahavidyalaya, Nagla Sikandar, Tundla, Firozabad, Uttar Pradesh (India)

Corresponding author Email: anjanimishra1089@gmail.com

Abstract: This research paper aims to analyse to show the real condition of women discrimination in the selected fiction writings of Buchi Emecheta along with analysing the theme, characterisation, incidents, events and climaxes, women's voice and African womanism, the role of polygamy, perpetual pregnancy, child-birth and widowhood, the mirror to the plight of the African women widowhood. She wants to give the glimpse of the plight and mental agonies of black women in the Nigerian society and the different women life stages including childhood, bridehood and womanhood. Most over it, she presents several related women issues such as lack of freedom, gender inequality, gender violence, and women as a source of income that completely shows women discrimination in African Ibo society. On the basis of analysing of primary data which is original text of Buchi Emecheta and related to critical studies, the researcher comes to a certain conclusion that Buchi Emecheta has been remaining success to present the women suffering in male dominated society of Africa. 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. This research work is anchored on feminist theory. Buchi Emecheta is one of the African feminist writers that is concerned about women and sees women as being handicapped merely because they are female. This study therefore analyses Buchi Emecheta's novels using eclectic approach. The research methodology used for this study involves critical textual and discourse analysis of Buchi Emecheta's novels. This research examines the female gender crisis in Buchi Emecheta's novels and discovers for instance, that persistent inequality between men and women in her works is as a result of contradictory culturally imposed social values. These gender crises in her works are depicted in the following themes: the predicament of being a girl child, societal conspiracy against womanhood, women as chattels of trade and property for sale, polygamous marriages and tyranny of the patriarchy. Buchi Emecheta presents education as the most essential weapon for challenging gender inequality.

[Mishra, A. **NOVELS OF BUCHI EMECHETA AND WOMEN DISCRIMINATION**. *The International Journal of Interpretation, Observation and Analysis*, 2025; Volume 2, Issue 1:8-12 (April-June). ISSN 2349-0713, Peer-reviewed (online/offline), Refereed, Indexed and International Journal (Since 2013), Global Impact Factor: 5.776

Keywords: Novels, Buchi Emecheta, African Women

Introduction:

Florence Onyiah Buchi Emecheta is commonly known as a literary name Buchi Emecheta, as Nigerian novelist, was born on July 21, 1944, in Nigeria. She belongs to Igbo family. At that time her father gave preference to male dominant society and sent his younger son to school while Buchi Emecheta was initially kept at home. But she wants to go to school so she told her parents about the benefits about her education and convenience them, she spent her childhood in an all-girl missionary school. At the age nine years old, her father has been died. After a year, when she was studying in Methodist Girls' School in Yaba, Lagos, she got scholarship at the age of 16 years old, in 1960 at that time she got married to Sylvester Onwordi whom she had been

engaged since she was 11 years old. After her unhappy married life, Emecheta moved to London and worked as a library officer in the British Museum from 1965 to 1969. Along For the Inner London Education Authority, she has been performing as a youth activist and sociologist duty from 1969 to 1976, and from 1976 to 1978 she worked as a community activist in Camden, North London. Along with performing as a community activist she has been remaining success to get name for a full time writer and she published several works in Allison and Busby publication such as – *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Destination Biafra* (1982), *Titch the Cat* (1979) and *Nowhere To Play* (1980) 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 1990s. 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 Bulawayo (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.

Gender may be referred to as sex that is, being male or female. It is a range of physical, mental and behavioural characteristics distinguishing between masculine and feminine. Sexuality on the other hand is a confused word. This stems from the confusion in our very language between sex, meaning male or female and sex, meaning sexual activity. Because of women's oppression as a sex, sexuality has inevitably been one of the most vital topics for feminist examination. The term 'sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably in every day speech in scholarly writings. Sex involves biological characteristics in humans. According to Arliss (1990:45), —sex refers

to biological category. Each of us can be labeled either male or female at birth based on observable physical evidence that is, the nature of the genitalia...l Also, she adds that, —masculine and feminine gender may be understood as gender terms that cannot be assigned at birth, but inferred based on individual behaviour. Therefore, gender must be enacted while sex is assigned. A gender role is a set of social and behavioural norms that are generally considered appropriate for either a man or woman in a social or interpersonal relationship. It can be viewed as culturally specific assignment of traits and roles to each sex: male or female. That is why one can say that generally feminine gender has the following characteristics -submissive, emotional, dependent, fragile, gentle, quiet, tactful, sensible, yielding and verbal while the masculine gender has the following characteristics: aggressive, rational, independent, strong, rough, loud, blunt, insensitive, competitive and physical activity oriented. Although the story line may seem fictitious, the novel actually reflects what is going on in our environment. When we talk about the challenges we face in our marital homes, we talk about abortion, inequality, betrayal, infidelity, deprivation of the rights of our female children, which make them pregnant, labour and childbearing. - is associated with trauma undergoing nutrition. However, many of them die in this condition, causing their children to suffer at the hands of their unhappy father, especially women because they are not considered men. They are denied education, are not well cared for, and this happens until they grow up, are forced to marry, and tend to their grandchildren. It is the same society as women find themselves in developing countries. The purpose of this paper is to study the challenges facing women people in a developing society and to point to lessons learned from understanding the novel *Head above Waters*

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.

Theoretical framework

The theory of feminism was introduced to oppose the patriarchy structure. Feminism is largely a socio-political movement which developed from the 1960’s onwards and whose purpose is to better the lots of women. Feminism at its most basic definition is simply a movement fighting for equal rights of women. It is also a proposal for social transformation of women. Over the years, the term feminism has earned itself some terrible connotations such as bra-burning, man haters who reject anything that falls under the term ‘_feminine’. In fact, feminists never burned their bras, and do not hate men, rather, they fight for women to have the choice to do what they want to do. The idea behind feminism is that all women have the choice to do what they want to do like men. Showalter in Ann’s *Theory into practice...* (2009:107) acknowledges that, today there is no single strand of feminism or feminist criticism. Akachi Adimora, Ezeigbo (1996) identifies two types of feminism – ‘_the radical and liberal’. There are other feminist theories such as marxist, Stiwaniist and Womanist.

African feminists have no violence and militarism. Feminists like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba and others find fault in the type of delineation given to female characters in many male authored texts. These writers and other critics argue that even at the best imaginative writing by men, they are not accurate representation of the actual position of women in society. In the African

feminists view, nobody can apprehend and faithfully reflect the complexities of the condition of women better than the women themselves. In Africa and in Nigeria in particular, the story of women is basically that of the second class citizen. There are different levels of subordination of women to be found in Africa compared to the Western World. While African feminism focuses on socio-cultural (communal) existence or relations, western feminism incorporates issues concerning sexuality, lesbianism and homosexuality. These experiences are totally outside the African women's experience. African feminists find the label _feminist too strong a tag to bear. The reason is fear of societal ostracism. Surprisingly, these pioneer female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta and others reject feminism even though their works and thematic concern as women writers clearly portray them as feminists.

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.

References

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin .*The Empire writes Back: Theory and Practice in post-colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.Print.

Bazin, Nancy Topping. "Feminist perspectives in African Fiction, Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta". *Black Scholar*, 17-2 (1986) : 34-40.

Behmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Post-colonial Literature*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1995.Print

Brown, Lloyd. *Women Writers in Black Africa*.Connecticut; Greenwood, 1981.Print.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Femiinist Thought*.New York: Routledge, 1990.Print.

Dovies, Carole Boyce.*Black Women Writing and Identity:Migrations of the subject*. New York: Routledge, 1994.Print.

Du Bois, WEB. *The Souls of the Black Folk*. NewYork: Vintage Books, 1961.Print.

Frank Katherine." Feminist Criticism and the African Novel." *African Literature Today*. 14 (1984):34:47.

Halfkin, Nancy J. and Edna G. Bay ed. *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. Stanford UP, 1976.Print

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
INTERPRETATION
OBSERVATION & ANALYSIS