

Black Feminist Epistemology and Self-Identity through Education and Employment in Buchi Emecheta's Second-Class Citizen: Female Empowerment amid Racial and Patriarchal Oppression

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Abstract:

Nigerian-British prolific writer Buchi Emecheta's semi-autobiographical novel 'Second-Class Citizen' (1974) stands as a landmark work in African women's literature. It follows the transformative journey of the protagonist, Adah Ofili, from colonial Lagos to postcolonial London. She was born in Lagos, Nigeria where she spent her marginalized childhood amid patriarchal Igbo norms and migrated to London in her adulthood and faced racial discrimination as an immigrant in postcolonial Britain. The social forces in both the countries shape and constrain her sense of 'self'. The novel stands as a powerful testament to what Patricia Hill Collins defines as 'black feminist epistemology', which is about understanding the world through the real-life experiences and knowledge of Black women who face oppression and how these lived experiences turn into their source of intellectual and political power. (Collins 18) Emecheta shows how her protagonist Adah builds her sense of self by working hard to get an education in patriarchal society where education for girls was forbidden, finds respectable employment in racial Britain and emerges as a successful writer. This growing independence builds her confidence and helps her break free from both male control and racist treatment. By analyzing this Buchi Emecheta establishes a Black feminist epistemology in the novel 'Second Class Citizen' where education, employment and writing become the primary vehicles for female empowerment proving she is a valuable human being, not just a "second-class" person.

Key-words: black feminist epistemology, women empowerment, patriarchy, gender oppression, colonialism, racial discrimination, African feminist literature.

Introduction:

Buchi Emecheta was a Nigerian-British novelist who powerfully explored the lives of women facing patriarchy, migration, and poverty. She wrote mostly from her personal experiences and became one of the most important African women writers and voice for later generations of suppressed African and diasporic women and women writers.

The formative novel *Second-Class Citizen* was published in 1974 and is widely read as a semi-autobiographical account of Buchi Emecheta. She portrays her own experiences of tradition, patriarchal oppression, abusive married life, forced motherhood, migration, dehumanizing racism, and economic hardship by giving voice to the protagonist of the novel Adah Ofili (Adah Obi after marriage) across Nigeria and Britain. Adah through the writer's lenses seeks autonomy and dignity in deplorable social environments. This novel explores the themes like gendered oppression, racism, and the empowering roles of education, employment, and writing. The novel is significant because it was one of the first to discuss Black feminist concerns in postwar Britain. It focuses on the life of a female immigrant, a perspective, a viewpoint not often seen in mainstream books. This paper argues that education and employment are the key sites where Adah transforms her sense of self by pursuit of education, respectable employment, and writing in both patriarchal and colonial power.

Gendered Erasure and the Birth of Epistemic Resistance:

To understand Adah's journey, one must situate her within the framework of Black feminist epistemology. The sociologist Patricia Hill Collins defines it as a way of knowing the lived experiences of Black women as a valid knowledge, being an "outsider-within" gives them a special position that allows for a unique, critical view, perspective on power structures (Collins 11). Adah takes birth in a patriarchal society fighting against an erasure of her identity. From her very birth, her existence is marginalized: "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." (Emecheta 1)

In the patriarchal society of Ibuza in West Africa, her epistemological value is naught. She is treated as nothing and seen as a disappointment simply because she is not a boy and hence her identity is ignored. This very experience of Adah establishes the epistemological foundation of the narrative. Adah's existence is not recorded, not documented as she is not a son. This symbolizes the broader denial of female subjectivity and selfhood within both traditional Igbo society and colonial administrative systems. This also shows how only certain bodies and identities are given a worthy of documentation leaving women subjected from their very birth.

As a child Adah is not yet aware that she is being oppressed but her very marginalization plants the seeds of her later epistemic resistance. No one in her family keeps track of her age suggests this gendered neglect of how patriarchal systems operate to erase the fundamental identity of women. Importantly, Buchi Emecheta portrays Adah's marginalization as not natural but socially constructed. The disappointment of the birth of Adah is because the culture prefers sons, not because girls are worse. This distinction is crucial for black feminist epistemology: once the male-constructed nature of female inferiority is known later, Adah's growing awareness of being treated as unimportant, inferior and insignificant becomes the first step toward claiming her own identity.

Education Defies Power, Builds Identity:

Education emerges as the primary channel for Adah's self-identity formation, transforming her epistemology, turning her early instincts into a clear form of resistance. She was denied formal schooling initially due to gender bias, "Boys were usually given preference, though. So even though Adah was about eight, there were still discussions about whether it would be wise to send her to school. Even if she was sent to school, it was very doubtful whether it would be wise to let her stay long. 'A year or two would do, as long as she can write her name and count. Then she will learn how to sew'" (Emecheta 3). The family's logic treats that education is wasted on girls who will inevitably become wives and mothers after marriage.

Her experiences being excluded was intolerable injustice. "Whenever she took Boy to Ladi-Lak Institute, as the school was called, she would stand by the gate and watch all her friends lining up by the school door...Adah would stand there, filled with envy. This envy later gave way to frustration, which she showed in many small ways" (Emecheta 4). This envy is not merely emotional; it gives her a different perspective at an early age. Adah recognizes that education is power and that her exclusion from it is unjust. And this a lived experience of inequality compels her toward resistance.

After that Adah takes control and sneakily attends the Methodist School to get a Western education on her own. Adah's bold declaration earns Mr. Cole's support when she says, "I came to school—my parents would not send me!" (Emecheta 6). This breaks the classroom silence as all the boys were there but asserts her right to knowledge. For Adah, education becomes the way out of a life of nothingness. As she learns, she gains not only a way to escape poverty but more importantly, a way to stop being invisible.

Emecheta portrays the classroom not just as a place of learning, but as a site of existential resistance. Emecheta notes this, "Adah did not know for sure what gave birth to her dream... but the earliest anchor she could pin down in this drift of nothingness was when she was about eight years old" (Emecheta 1). This dream of the United Kingdom serves as a guiding epistemology for her. As scholar Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi notes in her analysis of Nigerian women writers, the "novel of development" for African women often hinges on the acquisition of Western education as the main way to get past traditional limits (Ogunyemi 65).

Adah realizes early on the importance of Education that "one's saviour from poverty and disease was education" (Emecheta 7), but more importantly, it makes her visible and recognized.

Migration, Aspiration, and Epistemic Futures

When "Lawyer Nweze" returns from the United Kingdom, seeing his education, his status catalyzes her imagination, and she resolves: "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...That she would go to the United Kingdom one day was a dream she kept to herself, but dreams soon assumed substance. It lived with her, just like a Presence" (Emecheta 13).

Adah's marriage with Francis was her strategic move, as she may move to England through his marriage. But Adah's education has increased her 'Bride Price', her market value as the traditional Igbo society treats her as property to be exchanged between men. "She was such an expensive bride because she was 'college trained,' even though none of them had contributed to her education" (Emecheta 22). Her family's demand for a high bride price i.e. "five hundred pounds", This reveals the commodification inherent in the bride price system. As scholar Marie Umeh observes, Adah "is caught between two conflicting worlds: one that expects her to be subordinate and the other that offers the potential for liberation through education and economic independence" (Umeh 124).

However, Adah denies this saying that Francis cannot afford the bride price, "She got great satisfaction, too, from the fact that Francis was too poor to pay the five hundred pounds bride-price Ma and the other members of her family were asking" (Emecheta 22). By preventing the bride price, Adah attempts to enter marriage on more equal terms with Francis but later she repents.

Racialized and Patriarchal Oppression in the Diaspora

When Adah migrates to London, the nature of her oppression shifts from patriarchal to racism with gendered subjugation. Here, the "second-class citizen" status is imposed upon her by the British racial hierarchy. When Adah and Francis face housing discrimination, "Sorry, No Coloureds" signs, Francis actually accepts this limitation as a fact of nature in the racist society. He warns Adah, "You must know, my dear young lady... the day you land in England, you are a second-class citizen. So, you can't discriminate against your own people, because we are all second-class" (Emecheta 42). And also embodies internalized patriarchy, "In Lagos you may be earning a million pounds a day;

you may have hundreds of servants: you may be living like an elite, but the day you land in England, you are a second-class citizen" (Emecheta 42). This declaration racializes Adah's inferiority and shatters her dream as she had nursed England as a 'heaven' to live a great life.

Francis continuously warns her to accept the "inferior" status while in England. But Adah rejects this, she does not accept the label of "second-class". Francis repeatedly fails his examinations and refuses to work; he is unemployed but Adah seeks employment as a pillar of her self-identity. She secures a "first-class job" at the North Finchley Library. "It was all right for her, being a first-class citizen for the part of the day when she worked in a clean, centrally heated library" (Emecheta 49). Through her education, resilience and will power she tries to erase her "second class" status. At the library, Adah interacted and often had scholarly discussions with her white English colleagues like Bill and Peggy. Employment changes her status from "second class" to "first class" and becomes economically independent, but this threatens Francis's masculinity. As Omar Sougou argues, Emecheta's protagonists often disrupt the gendered division of labor, leading to conflict because the woman's economic mobility exposes the man's stasis (Sougou 24). Patriarchal Francis scorns her intellectual ambitions, reminding her that "A woman would be forgiven everything as long as she produced children" (Emecheta 26). Seeing her status he always pushed her down to keep her submissive. He mocked her attempts at birth control and forced her into repeated pregnancies deliberately. But Adah tolerates everything for the sake of her children and her family.

Writing as Epistemic and Creative Practice

Due to repeated pregnancies, her professional opportunities become narrow, Adah turns to her first love writing. "She ran to Foyles and bought herself a copy of Teach Yourself to Write and sat down throughout all those months when she was nursing Dada and wrote the manuscript of a book, she was going to call The Bride Price" (Emecheta 196). This shows Adah's refusal to accept her prescribed roles as merely a wife and mother. Writing becomes another form of education, another pathway to express her.

Self-Definition and Emancipation

Adah's feminist self-definition occurs over the issue of her writing with Francis. He continued showing patriarchal control. For Adah, if education was the foundation and employment was the structure, writing is the pinnacle of her selfhood. Adah was diligently writing the manuscript of her first novel- The Bride Price whenever she could get the time. The most violent act of epistemic erasure is the burning of the manuscript of her novel by Francis. Buchi Emecheta reveals the depth of this violation, "Francis was burning her story; he had burned it all... The story that she was going to show Titi and Vicky and Bubu... She was going to say, 'Look, I wrote that when I was a young woman with my own hand'" (Emecheta 206).

Francis defends the burning of her manuscript by insulting her showing both gendered and racial inferiority 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" (Emecheta 203). This is an example of epistemic violence—the denial of someone's capacity to know, speak, or be taken seriously. It also shows internalized oppression of Francis.

Katherine Fishburn's assertion confirms that in Emecheta's work, the female protagonist must often undergo a "radical alienation" from her culture and husband to achieve self-realization (Fishburn 101). Here the burning of the book moment becomes paradoxical and it promotes her for emancipation from the abusive and cruel Francis who show patriarchy and racism combine to legitimize the erasure and control of women like Adah.

In the final confrontation, Adah takes back control of her life on her own, not only as a writer but as a mother who decides what motherhood means for her. When Francis denies control of his children in court, Adah comes forward and says, "Don't worry, sir. The children are mine... I shall never let them down as long as I am alive" (Emecheta 211).

This very moment shows that she has finished her journey: she has gone from the "insignificant" girl in Ibuza to a woman who stands firm and confronts in court, a mother who cares for her children, and a 'first class' citizen who seeks the purpose of her life.

Conclusion:

The novel Second-Class Citizen, therefore, stands as a declaration of Black female epistemology. Emecheta illustrates that a post-colonial woman does not receive an identity and autonomy rather she builds it through education and employment. The protagonist Adah Ofili refuses the labels a "second class" Even after her husband's abusive nature, she stands firm for her children. Although the physical manuscript is burnt, the capacity to create remains. Thus education, employment, material autonomy, and writing authority led her to empowerment. In the end, Adah proves that although society treats her as a second-class citizen, her mind, her work, and her power to define her 'self' give true freedom.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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