

Living as a Second-Class Self: Patriarchy, Domestic Tyranny, and Female Silencing in *Second-Class Citizen*

Ms. Sanobar Haque

Abstract:

Buchi Emecheta through her writings shows how oppression never arrives alone; rather, it comes piling up in the form of culture, gender, and race collectively. She writes and highlights the struggle as an activist, even when she does not claim herself to be the one. She belongs to a lineage of Black feminist voices that refuse the assumed centrality.

In the *Second-Class Citizen* through the protagonist, Adah, the author highlights the strength that lies in the small moments, ordinary lives, and daily pressures of women learning to endure, resist, and survive not just as a theory but rather as a lived experience of speaking back and defying the rigid hierarchies rooted in African tradition.

Thus, the paper questions the norms of gender socialisation in indigenous and metropolitan spaces where nothing is spared from the white-imposed denigration of Black identity in the Eurocentric norm.

Keywords: Oppression, Culture, Gender, Race and Black identity

The *Second-Class Citizen* is an autobiographical novel, but it never announces itself loudly, neither does it confess nor reframe. Buchi Emecheta steps back, creates distance and renames herself Adah, a fictional character, but firmer and more controlled.

Through this re-casting, Emecheta takes authority over her own life and shapes those experiences instead of merely reliving them. Memory becomes material not as a wound but as a tool. As a Nigerian woman writer, Emecheta cannot be separated from the broader struggle of African women's writing, a context that matters. Despite regional differences, African women writers share a familiar fate of being marginalised, overlooked, writing in abundance yet rarely celebrated, and this irony stings. This neglect is not accidental as in an interview with Ama Ata Aidoo conducted by Adeola James (1990), Aidoo speaks from frustration and exhaustion. She makes it clear that the muting of the woman writer's voice is tied directly to women's ordinary position in society, and literature does not float above power, rather mirrors it. What women writers received, Aidoo argues, was only the writer's version of the general neglect and disregard that women in the larger society get.

The same silencing and subjugation, the ideological conflicts over women's roles sharpened by colonial rule translated into literature. They are granted limited access to education, of writing, of publishing, and the doors of their dreams remain either half open or mostly shut.

In response to this, women writers pushed against systems and tradition, confronted, contested, and slowly, they carved a space for their survival. This struggle right at the centre of Emecheta's identity and her work demands voice and selfhood. Nigerian women writers write together, loud even when silence shapes her.

Home is the place where it starts. Her big aunt in Ibuza had a great storytelling skill that could lead a listener to hold his breath and thus, a series of stories being spoken and passed on to her. Later, Flora Nwapa, another spark, proves that writing wasn't forbidden and couldn't be, and Emecheta proves her right in her in *Second-Class Citizen* quietly and firmly.

Resistance came close to one's identity, but not in the form of an abstract silence but with strong words. It rises with conflict, discouragement, and strain. Private spaces become battlegrounds, and still she writes against expectation, exhaustion, and against everything that stops her persistence.

The attitude toward women hits readers right away in *Second-Class Citizen*. Adah was born as a girl that caused all her family great disappointment.

"You see, she was a girl, so she wasn't even positive that she was eight years old." Her arrival coincided with everyone's expectation and prediction of a son. Therefore, no one considered recording her birth because she was such a letdown to her parents, her immediate family, and her tribe. She was such a non-issue (Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen*1).

Her want for school got ignored at the early stage of her childhood, but her brother was considered and sent off. Adah thus remained home for some time, helping her mother, learning domestic duties, and writing letters.

But later, she resists quietly and joins school anyway with no permission from her parents. When her absence is noticed, punishment follows, but not to her but to her mother. She was taken to the station, questioned, and threatened by the policemen who suspected her negligence. Then after some time her father dies and pressure mounts. Mother forced into a levitate marriage and culture steps in with the immediate consequences. Adah's status slips from a daughter to a household help.

"One might think on this evidence that Africans treated their children badly. But to Adah's people and to Adah herself, this was not so at all: it was the custom. Children, especially girls, were taught to be very useful very early in life, and this had its advantages. For instance, Adah learnt very early to be responsible for herself. Nobody was interested in her for her own sake, only in the money she would fetch, and the housework she could do and Adah, happy at being given this opportunity of survival, did not waste time thinking about its rights and wrongs. She had to survive" (*Second Class Citizen* 16).

In Igbo society, a family needs a male head as a father or a senior man, without whom the home remains incomplete. Encouraging children to work made sense in Pre-colonial Nigeria; farms, fields, and labour mattered. As in big polygamous households, many hands were needed because wealth was mainly measured in people, and survival was dependent on it. Traditional humane living among the Igbo says that children trained and disciplined is not just parents' job but rather the whole community pitched in and taught that child to be independent and to take care of the family with no contradiction and balance. Socialisation and Interdependence are the heart of it and the community that shapes the personal identity needs to be respected and negotiated.

Women in those societies are not always powerless; rather, with care and patience, they could rise to the authority. In the early part of the novel, the arrival of a London-educated lawyer was a much acclaimed celebration with lots of colour and excitement where women were prepping and pride was swelling.

Adah's father lowers his voice almost sacred when he speaks of London, and when lawyer Nweze returns, his awe for the United Kingdom plants something in Adah deep, a longing for hunger, education, and desire. London to her became more than a place. The narrator says it assumed substance and lived with her, not abstract anymore but something real, just like a presence.

Adah does not wait as she knows very well that permission will never be granted to her. So, she once forced her way into a classroom and later to the Methodist Girls' School, even if it cost her a hundred and one lashes from her uncle. She assumed her pain to be temporary and her dream, which was although not fierce but relentless and strong, runs in the blood of Adah.

Her survival becomes necessary and so does her invisible rebellion. Various events in Lagos, as first being the lawyer's arrival, those celebrations and joys that Adah noticed and her father's delight led her to remember and compare his disappointment at her birth, and this made her to take a vow to visit the United Kingdom, as that would be considered as a compensation to the family for daring to come into this world as a girl.

The second moment hits after her father dies. Suddenly, everything shifts and her education may be gone. All for Adolphus, her brother, rage bubbles up in her mind, then jealousy and at last fury. A child's fury which led her to bite him hard and protest, and thus, again her determination hardens.

Then marriage came as a strategy, and Adah thinks marrying Francis would be a wise decision for her education, freedom, and mobility. Thus, with this hope she follows this marriage but irony bites back to her and after marriage, she was trapped in an indifferent marriage. Later, with lots of patience and hard work, she manages to visit London.

Thus, for a time being her dream rejuvenated, plans stall and she adapts the tactics of being cunning as a serpent and harmless as a dove. London is the place which both breaks her as everything fractures here and later gives her an identity that she has been seeking since her childhood.

When Adah landed in London finally, she found Francis was an old, unfamiliar, and angry man. His very look, every word turned out to be a lesson. England turns out to be a different land, having a different set of rules than its native land. Men here can "get civilized in England" whereas women are not allowed to acquire an identity.

Thus, Francis, who was half Igbo and half English, was full of disaster and Adah, an educated, employed woman still trapped with him in the name of the tradition. She was expected to cook, clean, obey, and her independence was highly despised by Francis, who regrets bringing an educated girl to London.

"Francis looked at her, as if with new eyes. Somebody had warned him that the greatest mistake an African could make was to bring an educated girl to London and let her mix with middle-class English women. They soon knew their rights. What was happening to them?" (73)

Francis keeps asking Adah not to forget that she is not just a woman but rather a black woman. Outside the home, Francis was crushed by racism and in response to the house he fights back and resents Adah with sexism, control, anger, and ultimately violence trickling down between them. Outside being treated as a Black man and second-class in the white world and at home, those discriminations erupt like volcanoes on his wife and children.

Christianity holds a tight grip on Francis and Adah thinks bitterly of missionaries and those scriptures. He asked her to believe the fact that a woman is supposed to be ready to give in to her man any time. Submission baked in and indigenous patriarchy get imported like a tag-team double bind. Francis refuses to work and excuses his responsibility with "Studying."

Thus, in order to get the family sustain Adah, must earn, bear children, and raise them alone. In return Francis believes that it's fair to cheat her with Trudy, who was a negligent, prejudiced white babysitter, often mistreating Adah's little kids.

"Can you, Francis, show but was there a month when your father did not pay the rent, give me some vests or anything these children can lay their hands upon which you have claimed to have bought for them? No,

Francis, you broke the law of our people first, not me. And remember, Francis, I am not your mother. I am me, and I am different from her” (Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* 208-209).

At last, when things remained unsorted, her bride price was paid, and ultimately it became obvious for Adha whether Francis works or doesn't to labour and sustain herself and her children. When Francis almost hit her, Adah got shocked. As if this had happened back there at her home, the elders would have stepped in, and here nothing happened.

"In England, she could not go to her neighbour and babble out troubles as she would have done in Lagos, she had learned not to talk about her unhappiness to those with whom she worked, for this was a society where nobody was interested in the problems of others." (Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* 76)

Trudy, the child-minder lies and Adah realises that whites are as fallible and ordinary as a ordinary coloured people, which leads her to ponder over the claim of Whites' superiority. Cold and detached, she realised that Nigeria's communal ethic has completely been replaced by individualism, and to her loneliness is hitting hard, dreamland turning into poverty, struggle, and failure.

Racism waits outside and rented rooms are denied to her, "Sorry, no colours.", and her blackness turns into shame. But Adah reacts differently and Francis internalises inferiority. She refuses, demands equality, adapts, strategizes and writes. But her writing came to a final rupture when Francis can't handle a woman writer in his house and later burns her masterpiece *The Bride Price*, and ultimately her brainchild has been killed and destroyed by him. As Adah walks into danger of writing, authority comes with it and patriarchal power rattles insecure men.

Francis, who is already emasculated Igbo man in London, can't take it, as his authority threatens him, and so does his religion. He burned the manuscript purgatory to erase the sin by fire. Adah, however defiant and unstoppable, rises sharper, passing on the legacy of the writer being unbeatable.

Francis dismisses manuscript as "Rubbish." and Emecheta exposes a pattern, an archetype of dominating cruel man against woman. Francis's rejection mirrors African men's resistance to women's voices. Francis with no valid argument, in fire of jealousy says it plain that writing is something that masculine preserves. Women are for breastfeeding and nothing else. Burning the manuscript meant to end her silence and ultimately their relationship.

Thus, after this incident, divorce follows and Adah's solitary struggle remains forever as a single mother of five in London. Out of struggle, second-class citizens born from survival and pain turned into form. Immigrant life remakes Adah just like it remade Emecheta. Displacement, possibility and in-between spaces, unsettled zones and identity reworked as new strategies of selfhood, a new sign, a site of contestation and an artist and author emerges and ultimately a woman and the mother wins over again.

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