

# CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES OF WOMEN AWAKENING AND EMPOWERMENT IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S NOVELS: SECOND CLASS CITIZEN AND THE NEW TRIBE

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**Abstract:** Africa and the world over continue to grapple with the problem of whether women are capable of being true citizens or are still labeled as the 'Other' just like the colonizer did. This study investigated Buchi Emecheta's portrayal of African women as they dare the difference beyond the chains in a patriarchal society in two novels namely *Second Class Citizen* and *The New Tribe*. Of primary concern to the study is the position of female characters in the two novels to dare the difference when awakened and empowered. This study has examined comparatively the challenges and possibilities of female empowerment in *Second Class Citizen* (Nigeria) and *The New Tribe* (Diaspora). The study was undertaken through the lens of African Feminism and Postcolonial theories. Both theories are similar in the sense that they are concerned with marginalization of people, they recognize the woman's struggle and challenges and how they change with the changing times. African Feminism theory will be supplemented by postcolonial theory that emphasizes the need of change in an individual, to whom the colonizers themselves imposed, hence addressing the needs and conditions of the African woman. The study has employed qualitative research design since it involves description of evidence as depicted in the texts. Data was obtained from close reading of primary texts supplemented by secondary sources including literary texts, dissertations, theses, projects, journals and books, both print and online. The data collected were presented in the form of descriptions, content analyses and logical argument. The findings of the study, among other things; provide invaluable insights on the need of awakening and empowerment in the woman's life through literary works to provide for the changing times and overcome patriarchal limitations. It is of great importance that the woman reconstructs herself to provide for this and the texts to faithfully portray them as such.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an endeavor to study the fictional works of Buchi Emecheta, the researcher looks at existing critical works on the author, and other perspectives on the role of women's writing in Africa and the African Diaspora. The first step would be to recognize, from the onset, that the popular view - that men have largely dominated the African literary landscape - cannot be taken for granted. This scenario has over the years gone hand in hand with the feeling that male writers like Chinua Achebe made presentations that were biased against women. Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) restates that African women writers "have been rendered invisible in literary criticism" (2). This means that to Stratton, there has only been piecemeal attention directed at women writers, while male

writers have enjoyed immense literary appreciation. This is the same view held by Susan Arndt who, in 'Buchi Emecheta and the tradition of *Ifo*', states that African male writers "silenced African women in their texts" and proceeded to portray them "stereotypically and thus excluded them not only from literature but also from history" (30). Although the scenario has continued to change over the years, as shall be seen, there is an understanding of the need to accelerate the mainstreaming of studies of women writers. This is precisely why the researcher investigated how Buchi Emecheta awakens empowerment in her female characters.

Rutere Mugambi (1987) puts it that feminism as ideology conceives that women are inferiorized, oppressed and dominated by a patriarchal society which denies them all opportunities and self-fulfillment. It considers that the traditional gender roles between man and woman are cultural, not biological. These roles weaken woman, preventing her from recognition and development. Consequently, the ideological commitment of the feminist movement is the redefinition of male-female relationships, giving voice and authority to woman to play important roles for her own survival and that of her community. In the artistic articulation of these concerns, many women adopt radical positions, advocating a role-reversal which makes woman more powerful than man. In many of Emecheta's major works, this radicalism is visible, reiterates Rutere (1987). Appealing to the idea of universal human nature, Feminism also argues that women, as well as men, should pursue the virtues that elevate all human kind. For Cornelius F. Murphy, Jr. when a culture is patriarchal, women are submissive. Under oppressive circumstances, a woman who gives herself up to the image of herself that men have created demeans her own existence. Thus to gain her personal identity, she must overcome the impositions of patriarchy (Murphy, Jr. 96).

In this paper, the author utilizes feminist theoretical frameworks and gender analysis tools in my examination of the texts under focus. The choice is motivated by our understanding that feminist criticism provides us with tools requisite for a comprehensive critical appraisal of society. The author, like Chukurere contends that a feminist theoretical framework provides a viable approach that the heroines "may not always break free" but that their attempts demonstrate they are able to fight for their place in the family and society at large. For example, Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974), a fictional novel based on a true life experience of the author herself, tells the story of a young girl named Adah who struggled against the cruelty of culture and society to find her identity. From her abusive husband, to her controlling in-laws she was determined to be successful.

Buchi Emecheta's works depict strong female characters from the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial time frame. They scrutinize the various changes and obstacle experienced by Nigerian Igbo female characters. The defined role of women as wives and mothers are subsequently changed when faced with difficulties (Nadaswaran, 2012). While educating readers about the Nigerian culture, she also exposes the inhumane systems preserved by Nigerian culture. Most of Emecheta's personal experiences are reflected in her stories as she uses them to confront female enslavement. One unique aspect of Emecheta's writing is in her use of cultural practices that affect women, such as widowhood, girl child education, child marriage and polygamous marriage. Using the character of a young female, she shows how the traumatic experience does not hamper this young character but rather teaches her to grow in to a matured, strong and selfless woman. Emecheta stresses Nwapa's opinion that there are other opportunities for women other than wives and mothers (Philips, 2006). This paper therefore has sought to find how empowerment can be one of these opportunities for women.

Through awakening and empowerment women are able to make alive their vision of overcoming patriarchal limitations. Further, education empowers women to make choices that improve their standard of living and welfare, including their relationships and marriages, birth control, and having children, choices which were inaccessible to women in past generations as in Wikipedia 2017. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality.* Women empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. It is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women. Education and *Employment are enabling factors to women.* According to M. Bhavani, 2011 empowering women gives them lawful power and authority to act some activities of women.

Empowerment therefore as Buchi tries to reveal it, until women are given the same opportunities as men, entire societies will be destined to perform below their true potentials. The greatest need of the hour is change of social attitude to women. "When women move forward the family moves and the nation moves too" posits Bhavani. This is well elaborated in Buchi Emecheta's novel *Second Class Citizen* and *The New Tribe*. The best way for empowerment then is

perhaps through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women and empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed with income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in their society.

Though women have made tremendous effort in relation to empowerment, much has not been realized. Women oppression has been in existence for so long. Many female authors have tried in vain to portray a different picture of who a woman is, far from that which the society or male authors have tried to ingrain. This paper highlights the extent to which a woman can achieve when let to without boundaries or limitations. Can a woman get involved adequately in leadership and in employment after acquiring a worthwhile education and overcoming all the patriarchal limitations? This study has exposed how a woman can effectively support her family, society and finally nation if given the opportunity to. This undoubtedly tells us that a woman can make a difference in this patriarchal society. The awakened and empowered woman has been given the opportunity to express herself, yet still there seem to be some hindrances. This study has therefore filled the gap by undertaking an in depth analysis of the female character with a view to finding out how much she can dare do when awakened and empowered.

## 2. CHALLENGES OF WOMEN AWAKENING AND EMPOWERMENT

*Second Class Citizen* seems to develop the theme Buchi starts *In the Ditch*; the double misfortune of a black woman in a foreign land. First, she is a black person then second, a woman, while the whites regard her as a second class citizen because she is black, the man regards her as a second class citizen because she is a woman; this becomes a great challenge that she has to go by in her life. Buchi creates a woman faced with the inevitable socio-cultural changes in her movement from her home at Ibuza to London. Adah, however, is receptive to these changes and is ready to experiment with new modern ideas like the use of contraceptives. This she does without the knowledge of her husband Francis who resists the idea violently. Although she is accommodative to the various changes that are taking place in her new world, Adah's Ibo consciousness is not completely eroded. She is even ready to get more children for her husband. Unlike Adah, Francis her husband is very reactionary and not at all prepared to abandon his Ibo forms of conduct.

I stayed at school until I was sixteen then I could no longer avoid family pressures. I refused all men kept for me and married the man I called Francis in my other books but whose real name is Sylvester Onwordi, a dreamy handsome local boy who, though older than myself thought he too would make it in the U.K. (1986 :25).

From that experience Buchi grew to hate the cultural dictates of her society that never gave freedom to the girl to grow and make her own decision about her marriage. Such practices as society choosing one's marriage partner are clearly the objects of Buchi's scathing criticism in her books like *The Bride price* (1976) and *The Slave Girl* (1977). In *Second Class Citizen*, she chooses by herself who to marry her and she finally paid her bride price. In the study this is a big challenge, the liberty to make decisions is very limited. Adah the protagonist in *The Second Class citizen* is awakened and empowered in Lago's. She is employed and living as an elite with an unimaginable salary. With her in her homestead she has employed numerous workers but yet still she is not allowed to make decisions as a mature individual. She has to make sure that in any kind of decision making she has to go through her husband who will in turn have to consult with the larger family to ensure that the decision she is yet to make is appropriate. Why should someone else make vital decisions for one yet she is the one who holds a larger share of the input?

Eustace Palmer in an article "The feminist point of view: Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*" published in *African Literature Today* Vol; 13 concludes that Emecheta through her heroine Nnu Ego rejects the traditional concepts of a woman which consigns her to cooking, providing comfort. The traditional concept of who a woman is attributing to another challenge of women empowerment. Feminism as a theory advocates for women all over Africa and it is through female authors that they find a platform to voice their problems. Adah refuses to be manipulated by her in-laws; instead she sets the stage for them. Her dream which stirs vaguely at first becomes the 'reality' and the 'presence' which is largely the catalyst for the process of her transformation.

As S. Jay Kleinberg discusses in his introduction to *Retrieving Women's History*, the effort to rectify women's erasure in history entails not only an analysis of their work and their role in the family, but also an analysis of "both formal and informal political movements and ... their impact upon women, women's participation in them and the ways in which they shape male-female interactions and men's and women's roles in society." From the onset in the novel *Second Class Citizen*, Adah is a big disappointment to her family and the entire community. She was given birth to at a time 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. The birth of a woman in the society was thought of as a setback. Feminism according to Beasley (1999) is against such discrimination. It is evident from the text that the protagonist deserved a better treatment from all that she has been able to achieve. Adah has gone to the extent of providing for her entire in-laws family other than just pay for her husband's college fees which does not bear much fruit; ironically it's the protagonist who is playing the leading role to provide for leadership qualities and all that entails to it and not her so called 'husband'.

Women empowerment is a great barrier to overcome. The emancipation of women is tied to her education. Through the awakening and provocation of this idea in herself her liberation is for sure. The works of Buchi Emecheta clearly portrays the protagonist Adah with a self will to be educated. The society believes that this will only benefit the family into which a woman is married to. Therefore, a woman if possible is given little opportunity to sustain her in her marriage. Awakening begins in a woman's life to overcome every challenge that comes her way. Adah has a dream which is stirred very early in her life. This is clearly indicated when her younger brother is given preference to start school before her. Adah struggles by herself to ensure that she goes to school. Her mother who should be a great encouragement to her to help her achieve her dream instead is the one who stands in her way.

Women fighting against themselves are also another great challenge. Adah's mother ought to have motivated her to ensure that her dream came to pass. The protagonist confesses when she sneaks from home to school that she is aware of the heavy punishment that her mother can give to her as compared to that of her father. In p.6 Adah thought that it was the experiences she had with her mother so early in life that made her to have such a low opinion of her own sex. It seemed to the protagonist that her mother had an issue with women. In p.14 at the age of eleven people started to ask her when she was going to leave school. This was an urgent question because the fund for Boy's education was running low; Ma was not happy with her new husband and it was considered time that Adah started making a financial contribution to her family.

This is very ironical, how does one give financial support to her family yet the contributing factor is withheld, that is education. Had Adah's mother been awakened and empowered she would not even have thought of a second marriage. Due to the fact that she is bound by culture she accepts to go in for another marriage that does not bring her happiness in any way. She still expects her daughter the protagonist to support her in this. Adah hated her Ma for marrying again, thinking it was a betrayal for Pa. She was determined to put her life in the right order in her own way. This is evident when she even uses biblical allusions to suit her tricky situation. She is given two shillings to buy meat and this was also what she needed to take the entrance examination to the school of her dreams. Her cousin's wife punished her violently for this after claiming that she had lost the money on her way to the market .In p.17 money was not available for her education yet her cousin sent her out again with three penny piece to buy the type of cane called the 'koboko'. It was one that the Hausas used for their horses. She survived one hundred and three strokes for two shillings in order to go to the Methodist Girls' High School or die. She concentrated her mind on something else.

There then the possibility of women empowerment came surging on .After her marriage and the coming of their daughter, she sought for several interviews and finally was selected to work as a librarian in the American Consulate Library at Campbell Street. The size of her pay packet worried Francis a little, and he had to ask his Pa for advice. This again became a challenge to Adah's empowerment. With her being empowered she would definitely be the leading light in her matrimonial home which was also against the norms of patriarchy. She claims her marriage was the saddest day in her life. Why the very many responsibilities that came with it which were unappreciated.

Now, at the age of eight, she is sorry for her parents. But she thinks that it was their fault; they knew it and they should not have had her in the first place, which would have saved a lot of people a lot of pain and suffering. When Adah's son Vicky is sick in hospital and the nurse asks her whether Vicky is her only child, Adah's answer is that she is only a girl. Again, after Tashi's birth, and after a long and painful ordeal, Adah has to come to her husband, Francis, bearing a girl. Everybody looks at her sarcastically for she has had the audacity to keep everybody waiting for nine months and four sleepless nights, only to tell them she has had nothing but a girl. It could simply be seen as a good nine months wasted. At the end of the novel Adah has rid herself of many self-denigrating dominator attitudes, has began a promising career as a librarian, has become the mother of five children, and has achieved economic independence together with the promise of psychological self-sufficiency. Though she has supported the family from the beginning as a child of both Ibo and

Western masculinity-driven systems, she has at least subconsciously clung to the notion that a complete woman is a married woman with children, even wishing at one point that she could just be a housewife. In p.22 it is recorded in *Second Class Citizen* that a woman could be forgiven of everything as long as she produced children, accommodate people of color. The novel centers on Emecheta's unquestioning acceptance that caring for her children is the essential part of her life, even while working and studying to improve her prospects. *Second Class Citizen* is largely an autobiographical account of her life: from orphaned childhood to success in school, followed by an unhappy marriage, five pregnancies and a cold and bleak existence in a London tenement. Through the struggle of her central character Adah we see how Emecheta began writing in a flat in North London, battling to find time to write within the framework of her hectic life as a University student, British Museum Librarian and single parent of five small children. The novel delineates the second-class citizenship of Adah in two parts: first as a black person in a predominantly white world, then as a woman in a male-controlled world (Ogunyemi, 983:65).

In the *New Tribe*, Ginny, the daughter of retired colonial administrators had received formal education and 'had settled for staying at home' until she received a late marriage offer from Arthur Arlington, the newly appointed vicar of St. Simon's church. In *The New Tribe*, the Arlington's adopt a black child Chester and Julia a white. Ginny receives a late marriage offer which is a great challenge to the patriarchal society. Ginny received a late marriage offer after staying home for a very long time. This is contradictory to what happened to Adah the protagonist in the *Second Class Citizen*. She believed that the only solutions to her predicaments in life were to get married early in life which true to say, was not the case. According to Cooper and Brenda (2007), women in Ginny's story play the role of African mothers, canals for carrying the pre-established destinies of their sons. Although they are invested with the biological role of conceivers, their importance is limited to their possible fulfillment of men's desire for sons.

### 3. POSSIBILITIES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1996:349) says that: survival as a fundamental issue in human interactions involves protest and affirmation. The individual's motivation to survive often protests against all forms of subjugation and oppression and in the process there is an affirmation for self-fulfillment and self-actualization. Although all individuals in one aspect of life or the other are confronted with the need to survive, it is often in the affairs of disadvantaged peoples - especially women in societies with numerous social restrictions- that survival becomes a primary objective. In her paper "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak states that the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be by passed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics can speak and know their auditions" (quoted in Ashcroft *et al.* 1995:25). This is similar to the situation of women. Having been doubly and at times triply oppressed (as foreign, as women, and as black) women are able to keep their heads above water, and if given a chance to write, like Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker, they do speak through their literature to highlight the plight of women.

Recent women writers subscribe to the notions of womanisms, where the female of the species stands out as a unique entity without recourse to male support and is able to chart out an unrestricted identity for herself. The qualities of capability, resilience and resourcefulness that build the super power image of the woman of Africa combine in the right proportion to structure issues like womanism and hence the concept. Looking at Ginny Arlington in the *New Tribe*, she has sought to find satisfaction in the life that she is living. At the age of 34, she is still very comfortable in her life there being no man who has proposed to marry her. She is not troubled by the dictates of the society that sets the precedence on when a woman should be married. Ginny is stronger and able to manage her challenges as a new breed, p.8. Finally when she is married to Arthur she is not able to conceive and sire children of her own. She takes the initiative to visit a doctor by herself without involving her husband at first because she was so concerned. This is also due to the fact that patriarchal communities as indicated by the author in the texts always blame the woman on issues pertaining to infertility in a family. Ginny does not want to take the blame. In the paper she has played the role of a man in the family. In P. 6 at last she has been granted what she so desired 'adoption' this transformed her life and ability. She is however not subjected to polygamy which is a cure to infertility in marriages. This clearly gives room for empowerment to a woman. The researcher can also clearly note that the pride of being a mother cut's across; it is eminent even with the whites.

In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah as a woman child shows signs of rebellion very early in life. She does not like the men that Ma and her clever cousins push to her. She vows that never in her life will she get married to a man, rich or poor, to whom she would have to serve his food on bended knee. She would not consent to live with a husband whom she would have to treat as a master. She knows that all the women do this, but she is not going to comply with this invidious and

demeaning practice. To show her intention of giving her female characters a meaning, Walker had this to say in an interview with Mary Washington (8 June 1993): My women, in future, will not bum themselves up - that's what I mean by coming to the end of a cycle, and understanding something to the end ... Now I am ready to look at women who have made the room larger for others to move in ... so that my women characters won't all end up the way they have been, because Black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move (Umeh, 1996:448). In *The joys of motherhood* Emecheta adopts a convention of the paired woman in her characterization of Nnu Ego and Adaku. They are the antithesis of each other in their responses to their patriarchal society, Nnu Ego choosing to conform to its role definitions and Adaku revolting against them. Emecheta punishes the conservative heroine Nnu Ego and rewards Adaku for her radical action. While Nnu Ego sinks further and further into poverty and remains dependent Adaku prospers and achieves independence, reinvesting her profits from prostitution in the cloth-vending business and sending her daughters to the best schools in the land. She does what Nnu Ego can only wish for. Adaku becomes a woman fulfilled in her and one who has hope in her daughters. As she states: As for my daughters, they will have to take their own chances in this world. I am not prepared to stay here to be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons. The way they go on about it one would think I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband. One would think I'd never had one before. People forget that. Well, if my daughters cannot forgive me when they grow up, that will be too bad (p. 169).

Francis on the other hand who is the husband to Adah and claims to play the leading role has never made decisions by himself (P.45). Francis must always make consultations with his father, mother and finally the siblings before he confronts any issue in his family, then what is his role in the family and society? the author and the researcher questions. Adah was like a peacock, who wanted to win all the time. This is seen in how she managed to go through the housing conditions which were very poor. Francis on the other hand kept blaming her for his failure in the summer examinations. Francis forgot that it had taken him five attempts to pass the first one. Where then does Francis stand out to be the man that the society and he claim to be? It would only be fair enough if Adah is given the title for assuming all her husband's responsibilities.

In *Joy of Motherhood* by Buchi one of her most celebrated novels, the protagonist Nnu Ego is the most complex of all her characters. She has chosen not to free herself from her unproductive and self destructive marriage. Buchi warns that clinging to tradition in the light of distortions of colonialism is foolish, in that it does not allow for survival tactics (and eventual success) that can help individual women and eventually, the community. African women must find a way of adapting to the new hybrid system culture. Focusing on Adah, the protagonist in the text *Second Class Citizen*, she has opted for a divorce in a marriage that is dehumanizing and one which does not give her space as an awakened and empowered woman. In her culture divorce is not embraced among women asserts a journal of humanity in *Search of Identity and Home* in Buchi Emecheta's novel.

The depiction of the African woman has been predominantly done with stereotypes. For instance, the Sweet- mother stereotype is relatively common in African literature. This image has a negative connotation that makes the African woman look the all accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice. Such utopian figure is often conflated with mother Africa with eternal and abstract beauty (Leslie 1978:6). On the basis of this understanding, the foremost task of this study is to investigate how Buchi Emecheta constructs and remodels the images of women in society to provide for the changing times in her fictional works. Adah decided to be as cunning as a serpent but as harmless as a dove (P.25). As a librarian Francis thought that she needed to be escorted during her pay days. She was a goose that laid the golden egg. She earned sixty pounds. This salary did a lot it was like a woman making investments in the labor market. She allowed Francis to first move to the United Kingdom and sends him twenty pounds every month, save her fair and that of her children, feed herself and the children whilst they were still in Lagos, help in paying school fees for Francis seven sisters and finally her four maids in her marriage- they were paid three pounds each. What more would feminism advocate for? This is the expected image that the author is calling for among women today, an awakened and empowered woman, who is able to change with the changing times. She is not just the sweet woman, mother Africa. She remodels the world around her by reaching out to many. The researcher cannot dare refer to Adah as the 'Other' as the colonizers did. Post colonialism as a theory fights this; the protagonist is not a second class citizen.

Emecheta does not only explore the negative impact of traditional culture and the imposition of colonialism on women, but she also shows how women have reacted to and fought oppression, sometimes succeeding, and sometimes failing.

What is most important to Emecheta is that women be given the prominent position they deserve in African fiction and that women's experience in the society be given a realistic portrayal. By doing this herself, Emecheta has brought out strongly the woman's perspective as never before in the history of the African novel (Eziegbo, 1996:22-23).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In trying to understand how awakening and empowerment is portrayed in Buchi Emecheta's *The Second Class Citizen* and *The New Tribe*. Central to my discussion was the need to show how the two novels show the challenges and possibilities of women awakening and empowerment. Guided by the feminist and post colonial theoretical frameworks, I have agreed that the two texts display instances where the position of the woman in the Nigerian culture is awakened and empowered.

In *The Second Class Citizen*, Adah is the epitome of a woman who challenges the societal view of the destiny of the girl child. She is determined to continue with her studies and achieve a better future as a librarian. In *The New Tribe*, the concept of awakening and empowerment can be summarized as follows. The boy-child is highly valued unlike the girl because the boy-child is said to be carrying the name of the family to the next generation. Motherhood is valued and a woman is the embodiment of cultural values. In doing a comparative analysis of the two texts, the study examined Characterization, plot and language use. Characterization, plot and language were used in developing the female characters and more so to highlight the challenges and possibilities of empowering a woman. The study found out that, while previously, some African male writers wrote their novels putting male characters at the centre while women were viewed as wives, mothers and that they were allowed to perform traditional roles only, the female writers are concerned with the greater role that the woman can play as an agent of change and not a mere object of it.

My final word would be that there is room for further research on Buchi's literature and her portrayal of women in their struggle against male domination. Hers is a call for universal awakening to give women space in education, labor and leadership. Therefore, my study is not conclusive in itself but it is a contribution to criticism on how Buchi Emecheta's literature represents the picture of women's emancipation in conservative societies like Africa and the rest of the world. From this study it is clear that literature, aside from being the mirror of the society is also concerned with being an agent of change with regards to the position of the marginalized, oppressed and subjugated in the society.

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