



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 12, Issue 01, 2023: 01-07

Article Received: 07-01-2023

Accepted: 14-03-2023

Available Online: 20-03-2023

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18533/jah.v12i02.2320>

Education as a Tool for Empowerment of the African Woman in *Second-Class Citizen*

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ABSTRACT

The deprivation of women, preventing them getting equal education opportunities like their male counterparts, is a common practice in many African societies. The current study focuses on Buchi Emecheta's treatment of the functional role of education for the African woman as fictionally presented in her novel *Second Class Citizen* (1974). The paper demonstrates the protagonist's struggle to attain education, challenging the cultural, racial and patriarchal oppressive forces that deny the African woman's right to have the chance of a proper education. Tracing Adah's's journey of acquiring education, the study illuminates the role of education in empowering the African woman intellectually and economically. Also, education has paramount significance in emancipating the African woman from subjugation and oppression. Equipped with education, Adah has achieved her dream of being a promising writer and a successful mother.

Keywords: Female education, Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen*, African woman empowerment

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1. Introduction

Education is perceived as key to human survival and social integrity in modern societies (Reid, 1986, p.109). It is widely acknowledged as instrumental in the development of society members, particularly women. *Second Class Citizen* (1974) by Buchi Emecheta is an exceptional example of her work that highlights the issue of women's education. The story revolves around Adah, a young Nigerian woman who leaves her country for London to pursue her education and live a better life. She, however, realizes that the expectations she had of equal education opportunities are hindered by a society system that tends to discriminate a woman due to her gender, class and race. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore the significance of female education to African woman shedding light on the factors that promote gender and racial disparity in education. The paper also emphasizes the pivotal role of education in empowering women, as well as the complexities of balancing traditional gender roles with

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modern aspirations. By focusing on Adah's struggle to achieve her dreams, the study attempts to provide insight into the complex lives of African women, and the ways in which they navigate the challenges of a changing world.

2. Literature review

There are many studies launched to highlight the pivotal need to educate women. Emphasizing the significance of female education, Florence Abena Dolphyne (1991), the first female professor at the University of Ghana, maintains that "only education can foster in women an analytical and a critical mind that would make them question the ... cultural and physiological bases of their supposed inferiority" (p.56). Many studies have proved the social and economic returns on investment in women's education and many considerable gains have been recorded, including improvements in infant mortality rates, healthcare, woman's involvement in development projects, the participation of women in educating the next generation and an increase in women's decision-making and work options (King & Hill, 1993, p.27). To raise people's awareness of the pivotal need for education, the United Nations declared 1990 as International Literacy Year, with distinct attention imparted to girls' and women's education at the World Conference (Ballara, 1991, p.18).

Tuzyline Jita Allan (1991) argues that: "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation" (p.189). In the same vein, Ibekwe Chinweizu (2005), in *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy*, claims "woman, who rules the nursery, shapes boys and girls for life; and the ways in which she shapes boys make them what they become as men" (p.15). These views underscore the undeniable importance of women's education as a prerequisite for making a contribution to the building and development of the nation

Studies by scholars such as Stromquist explain that education is central to the empowerment of women. In his article, "Women's Empowerment and Education: linking knowledge to transformative action" (2015), Stromquist highlights that education empowers women to challenge patriarchal systems that limit their opportunities. It further explains that women who have access to education are more likely to take on leadership roles in their communities and pursue personal and career goals. Another study entitled, "How Education Empowers Women in Developing Countries"(2021), Le Kien & Nguyen argue that education enhances women's socio-economic status and their decision-making capacity in personal and community-based issues.

Unfortunately, female education is not given enough consideration in most African societies due to certain patriarchal and colonial prejudices. In some African countries, girls are not allowed to attend school, whereas boys have to go to school to prepare them to lead the society in the future. On this discrepancy in education, Dolphyne (1991) contends: " It was not considered important to invest money in a girl's education, and whenever money was short and a decision had to be made between keeping a son or a daughter in school, it was the daughter who was withdrawn" (50). Moreover, when given the opportunity to attend school, girls do not receive the same type of education as boys: "In mission schools, and increasingly in special 'training homes' which dispensed with most academic courses, the girls were taught European domestic skills and the Bible, often in the vernacular" (Van Allen, 1972, p.179). Therefore, African women are restricted to taking care of children and managing the household. Being solely dependent on their husbands, women have lost power, self-fulfilment and self-identity, and see themselves as second-class citizens.

Therefore, depriving women of their right to access education is condemned by many African women writers who stoutly expose and oppose the suffering and miserable conditions of ordinary African women, due to their being wallowing in ignorance, poverty, oppression and a lack of identity. One of these writers is Buchi Emecheta who authored *Second Class Citizen* to shed light on the importance of education in transforming the lives of women. Adah succeeds in her pursuit of education despite limited resources, and the knowledge she gains becomes her source of empowerment. Following the protagonist's life experiences, the author highlights the obstacles women face in obtaining an education explicitly in a patriarchal society and the importance of perseverance to overcome such barriers. In conclusion, the current study is motivated by the interest to illuminate key questions related to the African woman's struggle to attain education challenging the cultural, racial, and patriarchal oppressive obstacles that deny her the right to have a chance of proper education. This task will be executed through an analysis as well as a critical scrutiny of *Second Class Citizen* which best

illustrates Emecheta's views on the viable significance of education in emancipating the African woman from subjugation and oppression. The paper, therefore, asserts that *Second Class Citizen* is a testament to the struggle of women in the pursuit of their own autonomy and independence through education.

Throughout her literary career, Emecheta struggles to defend the rights of the African woman, without rejecting the African man, because she is an ardent believer in the compatibility between man and woman. She calls for woman's emancipation, but not without her children, because she strongly values motherhood. Denying being labelled as a feminist, in the Western sense, she clarifies that: "the main themes of my novels are African society and family; the historical, social, and political life in Africa as seen by a woman through events" (Bruner and David, 1985, p.11). On another occasion, she asserts that "being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes ... I did not know that by doing so I was being feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small 'f'" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p. 7). Then, she justifies her attitude by declaring: "I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now I buy land, and I say 'Okay, I can't build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting'. That is my brand of feminism" (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p.7).

Born in 1944, Emecheta belongs to the first educated African generation. She was brought up according to Nigerian traditions which prioritize education for boys rather than girls. However, her firm belief in the power of education to surmount all difficulties encouraged her to pursue higher education. Due to some traditional obstacles, she was forced to leave school at an early age and get married. Motivated by her fervent ambition, Emecheta migrated with her husband and children to England to fulfil her dream of becoming a writer. She worked in a library and enrolled at London University to study Sociology. She started her literary career with some articles published by a British magazine, *The New Statesman Magazine*. Then, she published many novels, which include: *Second Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), *Destination Biafra* (1982), *Double Yoke* (1982), *The Rape of Shavi* (1983) and *Head above Water* (1986). In her novels, she was concerned with "the experiences of the modern African woman and chronicled their struggle for equality in a male dominated world" (Umeh, 1980, p.191).

Essential to this study is the analysis and interpretation of Emecheta's views on women's education. As a committed novelist, she highlighted the importance of women's education at a conference in 1985, declaring:

I want very much to further the education of women in Africa, because I know that education really helps the women. It helps them to read, and it helps them to rear a generation. It is true that if one educates a woman, one educates a community, whereas if one educates a man, one educates a man. (Emecheta, 1988, p.175)

Consequently, if a woman is equipped with a good education, she will be an asset to society-building and development. In her novels, Emecheta attaches great value to a woman's education to empower her to confront all racial, sexual and traditional constraints. Her heroines' ability to overcome life's obstacles depends on the level of their education. Highlighting the functional role of education, she argues in an interview: "I always believe that given the Big E—Education—the position of women can be very positive. [. . .] I believe that if you create a heroine, whether African or European, with education—not necessarily money, but education—she gains that confidence of being able to cope with the modern world" (Boss, 1988, p.99). Therefore, education, according to Emecheta, is the most powerful weapon for African women to regain their own rights and gain their emancipation. However, there are many obstacles facing African women seeking to access education. As she profoundly believes in the functional role of the educated woman in her society, Emecheta reveals her anxiety towards the negative attitudes towards girls and women's education in Africa, as she opines:

Working and achieving to great heights is nothing new to the woman of Africa, but there are still many obstacles in her way. Her family still prefers to educate the boy, while she stays at home to do the important jobs called 'women's duties'. And we accept the tag, knowing full well that the boy, however clever he is, would not be where he is today without the sacrifices made by his mother, his sweetheart, his wife or even his sister. The African woman has always been a woman who achieves.... But she still will have higher aspirations and achieve more when

those cleverly structured artificial barriers are removed, when education is free and available to every child, male or female, when the male-dominated media does not give exposure to a black woman simply because she is a beautiful entertainer, thereby undermining our brain power, and when we ourselves have the confidence to value our contribution to the world. ("Feminism with a small 'r'" p.181)

Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* is about the struggle of Adah, the protagonist, to pursue her chance of an education, despite the entrenched negative attitudes towards female education. Tracing the protagonist's life journey, the study explicates how the African woman is trapped by various gender and racial constraints. Adah has grown up in an Igbo community which, though being receptive to Western education, has favoured male education because men have the upper hand in the family and women are subordinate to men's will. This discrimination in education is explained in the following lines:

School — the Igbos never played with that! They were realising fast that one's savior from poverty and disease was education. Every Igbo family saw to it that their children attended school. 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. (Emecheta, 1989, p.3)

Born into a traditional patriarchal society, Adah was a disappointment to her family who were expecting her a boy: "She was a girl who had arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy. So [...] she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe" (Emecheta, 1989, p.1). Adah is not allowed by her parents to go to school, whereas her brother, Boy, is sent to school and always encouraged and appreciated by the family. Beside the patriarchal laws that favour men's education, the limited resources and the poverty of Adah's family make the education of her brother a priority, at the expense of Adah. Therefore, the reluctance of Adah's parents to send her to school represents a typical social and traditional barrier to female education in Africa. Later, when she becomes a young woman, she is afflicted by an abusive lazy husband who stands as an obstacle to her educational fulfilment. In England, she thinks that her life will be better, and her dreams can be successfully achieved. Contrary to her expectations, she suffers hostility and discrimination from white people against other races, particularly the black one. The novelist's ardent commitment to education is incarnated in the persistent attitude of her protagonist, Adah, who tries to defy all the challenges to acquire education and fulfil her dreams.

It is worth noting that Adah's deep obsession with education started at an early age. She is inspired by the example of her people's first lawyer, coming from the United Kingdom, who is seen as a "Messiah who would go into politics and fight for the rights of the people of Ibo. A Messiah who would see to it that Ibo would have electricity, that Ibo would have a tarred road..." (Emecheta, 1989, p.2). Thus, education, for Adah, is a means of recognition, development and social mobility. It is the pathway to freedom and self-fulfilment. Hence, she resolves that she must strive to get a high level of education to have a successful life like that of young, educated people coming from abroad. Consequently, she has to devise a plan to get an education in a patriarchal society to whom women's education is unimportant. Thus, her going to school without her parents' permission manifests Adah's first success in her journey to attain an education:

She [Adah] felt Mr Cole should have asked her why she came, but being reassured by his smile, she said in her little loud voice: 'I came to school – my parents would not send me!' [...] Adah scribbled away, enjoying the smell of crawl-crawl and dried sweat. She never forgot this smell of school [...] Pa would be all right: he would probably cane her, you know, just a few strokes – six or so, not much – but Ma would not cane, she would smack and smack, and then nag and nag all day long. (Emecheta, 1989, p.5).

Recognizing the importance of education in one's life, Adah decides to tolerate the brutal punishment of her cousin in order to pay the fees for her entrance exam. With this assertive strong passion for education, Adah desires to continue her university education, despite the norms of traditional culture that dictate:

...teenagers were not allowed to live by themselves and if the teenager happened to be a girl as well, living alone would be asking for trouble. In short, Adah had to marry ... She was going

to continue her education, she was going to go to Ibadan University to read Classics and she was going to teach at the end of it all. (Emecheta, 1989, p.25)

To achieve her goal, she contrived a marriage to Francis, hoping that she would have the freedom to continue her education. Because she is highly educated, Adah has succeeded in obtaining a first-class job with a high salary. Believing in the congruent relation between man and woman, Adah supports her husband and provides for his education to make him successful, too. She becomes the sole breadwinner for her husband and his family. Therefore, Adah's education has communal value since she is the financial provider for the education of her husband and his sisters. However, she is not only financially exploited but also culturally marginalized by her husband who believes that a woman is inferior to a man, boasting: "My father knocked my mother about until I was old enough to throw stones at him. My mother never left my father" (Emecheta, 1989, p.183).

Unfortunately, the selfishness and male-dominated traditional mentality of Francis disappoints her. However, Adah's education empowers her economically and psychologically to resist her husband's abusive and inferior treatment. For example, against her husband's wishes, Adah "refused working in a factory, after all she had several "O" and "A" levels and she had part of the British Library Association Professional Certificate" (Emecheta, 1989, p.44), an act that embodies her ambition and assertive attitude as an educated self-confident woman. Adah decides, for the first time, to confront him and contradict his objectification. Refusing the traditional Igbo image of a woman as a reproductive machine, Adah resolves to use birth control despite her husband's objection. This process of self-realization and actualization starts as she argues that no one has the power to control her body, claiming: "Could not the woman be given the opportunity of exercising her own will?" (Emecheta, 1989, p.135). As a result, Adah's "education, working experience and economic power strengthen her resistance toward Francis" (Haner, 2017, p.151).

Francis hates Adah's being intellectually and economically independent. His burning of her manuscript of "The Bride Price", their marriage certificate and her passport attests to his failure as a husband and partner. When Francis denies her and her children in front of the judge, she announces: "Don't worry, sir. The children are mine and that is enough, I shall never let them down as long as I am alive" (Emecheta, 1989, p.191). Her decision to divorce him marks a new phase in her life. Now, she is independent of Francis's oppression and exploitation. Educated and enlightened, she takes the responsibility for educating her children, "an English education and, for that reason, she was prepared to bear the coldest welcome" (Emecheta, 1989, p.27). Realizing the significance of education in one's life, Adah decides to secure a noble and humane education for her children, which her husband fails to provide, as she declares stoutly to Francis:

I hate you now, Francis, and one day, I shall leave you. I did not bring my children into the world to be brought up by a woman who can't even sign her name. A woman who used her thumb on our marriage certificate because she could not write. My sons will learn to treat their wives as people, individuals, not like goats that have been taught to talk. (Emecheta, 1989, p.127)

Adah has succeeded in developing a deep awareness of her identity as a strong independent woman and an educated mother who is capable enough to raise her children efficiently and instil in them human values of love, tolerance, compassion, equality and justice. Therefore, through the character of Adah, the novelist accentuates the significant role of educated women in contributing to nation-building.

Intelligent and courageous, Adah succeeds in going to England to liberate herself from the subjugation and exploitation imposed on her by a male-dominated community. However, her experience there when she first arrived is disappointing. The first interaction between Adah and the country of her dreams is described as follows:

England gave Adah a cold welcome. [...] If Adah had been Jesus, she would have passed England by. Liverpool was grey, smoky and looked uninhabited by humans. It reminded Adah of the loco-yard where they told her Pa had once worked as a moulder. In fact the architectural designs were the same. But if, as people said, there was plenty of money in England, why then did the natives give their visitors this poor cold welcome? Well, it was too late to moan, it was too late to change her mind. (Emecheta 1989, p.27)

In England, Adah has witnessed how black people suffer from discrimination and segregation. They are denied the opportunity to access many services, such as housing and work opportunities. As a result, a deep sense of inferiority inflicted an identity crisis and psychological trauma on many African people. In his conversation with Adah to illuminate the humiliating conditions of black people in England, Francis states: “You must know, my dear lady, that in Lagos you may be million publicity officers for the Americans; 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 1989, p.30). Plagued by an inferiority complex, Francis becomes ashamed of his black identity and prevents his children from speaking their African native tongue. Therefore, when Adah asks her daughter Titi to use her native language, Yoruba, Titi replies: “Don't talk to me. My Dad will lash me with the belt if I speak in Yoruba. And I don't know much English. Don't talk to me” (Emecheta, 1989, p.50).

Later, Adah feels inferior to the white women at work. She feels ashamed of her appearance, the style of her hair and her traditional clothes, since “they gave her the look of an overblown ballet dancer” (Emecheta, 1989, p.41). She suffers from a feeling of disintegration: “She, who only a few months previously would have accepted nothing but the best, had by now been conditioned to expect inferior things. She was now learning to suspect anything beautiful and pure. Those things were for the whites, not for the blacks” (Emecheta, 1989, p.71). Consequently, Adah's rejection of her black identity stems from her desire to be treated as a first-class citizen.

Conscious of the effectiveness of her education, Adah, nevertheless, resolves to combat the feeling of inferiority as a black woman in a white racist society. It is only through her communication with white people that she discovers that white people are not without their mistakes, as she thought before: “There were bad whites and good whites, just as there were bad blacks and good blacks! Why then did they claim to be superior?” (Emecheta, 1989, p.50). She realizes that she is unique, because of her intelligence and education which contribute to her success in overcoming racial prejudice. It is through reading about the life of James Baldwin, it is “through Bill that Adah knew of James Baldwin. She came to believe, through reading Baldwin, that black was beautiful. She asked Bill about it and he said, did she not know that black was beautiful?” (Emecheta, 1989, p.145).

Her education enables her to regain her dignity as a black woman with a great African heritage. She realizes her power to stand as an equal to white people since she acquires a decent job as a Librarian in the American Consulate Library on Campbell Street in London, which paves the way to her achieving her dream of becoming a promising writer. Manipulating the language and literary style of white people, Adah has skilfully composed her first masterpiece, the “Bride Price”, injected with some African traditional elements. Highly enlightened, she decides to pass this feeling of pride on to her children by educating them to appreciate the beauty of their blackness, as explained in the following: “Her children were going to be different. They were all going to be black, they were going to enjoy being black, be proud being black, a black of different breed” (Emecheta, 1989, p.138). Highlighting the pivotal role of Adah's education, Agho and Osighale (2008) point out: “Through the character of Adah, Emecheta ... emphasizes the significant function of education in the social and economic liberation of women as demonstrated by Adah. If Adah had not been educated, she would not have been able to become the family's breadwinner. With education, a woman is free” (p. 606).

3. Conclusion

Second Class Citizen has remarkably delineated the instrumental role of education in the life of the African woman, as fictionalized in the protagonist's life journey. Buchi Emecheta captures the struggle of the African woman with poignancy, highlighting the importance of women's education in a society that often belittles and degrades them. She composed *Second-Class Citizen* to enlighten women on the necessity of education as a viable means for women's emancipation from the racial and sexual forces of subjugation, and empowerment. She writes about her experiences as a girl and a woman striving to get an opportunity for education to break the shackles of an abusive culture. The study proves that Education is an avenue to creating self-confidence and an autonomous identity. Following Adah's life journey, one can discern that though the African woman is vulnerable to several racial and gendered vices, she has enough potential to surmount all these difficulties and credit goes to education via which a female individual is imbued with courage and determination.

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