

Second Class Citizen: The Point of Departure for Understanding Buchi Emecheta's Major Fiction

Abioseh Michael Porter, Drexel University

It has been said that "of all the women writers in contemporary African literature Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct feminist protest."¹ While there is no doubt about the validity of this statement, one thing that is questionable is the persistent attempt by some scholars (Katherine Frank and Eustace Palmer, for example)² to read Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*³ only within the feminist protest tradition. It would not make sense, of course, to suggest that in evaluating the works of a writer such as Emecheta (who in all of her novels deals quite seriously with the role of women in various societies), one can avoid the feminist question. It is something else, however, to imply that this is the only aspect worth examining in her oeuvre. In fact, Frank, in her essay, "The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta," demonstrates the danger of focusing almost exclusively on Emecheta's feminist theme by making all kinds of sweeping and erroneous generalizations about the African woman's "bondage" and the Western woman's "freedom" in Emecheta's works. We can also say that because *Second Class Citizen* has often been seen as a somewhat flawed feminist novel, critics such as Lloyd W. Brown have failed to notice the novel's full generic potential. Brown comments that "the emphasis on individual growth and self-reliance is more fully developed in *Second Class Citizen*" than in Emecheta's first novel, *In the Ditch*;⁴ however, he also consistently deplores the heroine, Adah, in those sections where she is obviously displaying naivete, immaturity, and ignorance—qualities commonly found among protagonists of the novel of personal development. One other critic does not even

¹Lloyd Wellesley Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981) 35.

²Katherine Frank, "The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta," *World Literature Written in English* 21.2 (1982): 476-97; Eustace Palmer, "The Feminine Point of View: A Study of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*," *African Literature Today* 13 (1982): 54-65.

³Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* (London: Fontana, 1977). All page references are to this edition.

⁴Brown 44-48.

mention Emecheta in an essay dealing with the female bildungsroman in the Commonwealth.⁵

It is my view, however, that if *Second Class Citizen* were read as a novel of personal development (bildungsroman), some of the seeming inconsistencies within the text would be more fully understood. Also, a look at this work as a novel dealing with a young African woman's gradual acquisition of knowledge about herself as a potential artist and about the themes of love, marriage, and the subject of student life overseas (especially in a hostile environment) will add more weight to the already popular feminist theme in the book. Finally, Emecheta's (albeit lukewarm) acceptance of Dickens—that master creator of apprenticeship novels—as a possible source of influence and the structure of *Second Class Citizen* can be seen as further reasons for reading the work as a novel of personal development.⁶

Adah, the protagonist of *Second Class Citizen*, is portrayed as an intelligent, ambitious young girl who has to fight against considerable odds to gain an education in Lagos. As a child, she has to inject herself into the classroom of a friendly neighboring teacher before she is finally enrolled in school. This is so because her parents (especially her mother) have doubts about the wisdom of sending girls to school. Tragedy soon strikes for Adah when her relatively liberal father dies not too long after her registration at school. She then moves into a relative's home where she is kept as a ward-cum-slave. After a life of abject misery and exploitation and also by dint of hard work and proper self-motivation, Adah is able to win a scholarship in the highly competitive secondary school entrance examinations.

As a result of a first-rate performance at the school-leaving examinations, the heroine is able to procure a job as a librarian at the American consulate in Lagos—a job which easily brings her the comforts of middle-class life. During this same period, she meets Francis Obi, a young student of accounting whom she agrees to marry because she thinks he will provide some necessary protection, support and, above all, love for her in Lagos. Looking at Adah's salary as a convenient means of financial support, Francis (with his parents' approval) decides to go and continue his studies in Britain. The idea is accepted by Adah because, in part, it provides an avenue for her to fulfill her own childhood dreams of going to study in England.

Francis goes to England and is soon followed by Adah and their three children. But, from the time she arrives in Britain, Adah (like some other protagonists in African novels dealing with student life overseas) begins to notice that that country is far different from the fairyland she had been brought up to conjure. Worse, she realizes that Francis, who had always been dependent on

⁵Margaret Butcher, "The Female Bildungsroman in the Commonwealth Literature," *World Literature Written in English* 21.2 (1983): 262-65.

⁶Buchi Emecheta, "A Nigerian Writer Living in London," *Kunapipi* 4.1 (1982): 115.

her, has become even more so and more manipulative in England. His lifestyle is now characterized by gross antisocial behavior, a feeling of inferiority, laziness, and utter irresponsibility. Adah tries at first to support the family and take care of the home but it also becomes clear to her that Francis's irresponsibility is in direct proportion to his desire to create more children. When Adah confronts him with this obvious domestic problem, Francis becomes defensive and starts brutalizing her. The final clash occurs when, after the birth of their fifth child (at a time when Adah is barely twenty-two), Francis spitefully burns the manuscript of Adah's first novel. *Second Class Citizen* ends with the heroine seizing independence for herself and her children and with preparations to start a fresh life at last.

As with all works belonging to the apprenticeship novel tradition, Adah's innocence and naivete serve as generic markers in the initial sections of the story. Significantly, *Second Class Citizen* starts with a reference to Adah's "dream" of going to England. Using rhetoric that clearly emphasizes her innocence, Adah mentions how, with the help of her father, she goes through adolescence with an exaggerated and false conception of Britain. Like her father, she grows up believing that the United Kingdom is synonymous with heaven (8). She makes a "secret vow" quite early to herself that "she would go to this United Kingdom one day," and she wrongly assumes that her arrival in the United Kingdom "would be the pinnacle of her ambition" (17). If there were any doubts about the differences in point of view between the novelist and her young alter ego, statements such as these should erase such doubts.

Adah's problems, however, go deeper than merely being ignorant of the culture of a foreign country. As descriptions of life with her husband show, she enters into a hastily arranged and ill-conceived marriage without the least idea about the real nature of love, marriage, and the related notions of individual liberty and mutual support. This situation is so because Adah has grown up in environments where she has been deprived of learning about or experiencing such concepts that are so vital for successful marital relationships. In fact, it is shown that up to the time Adah and Francis get married she has neither experienced any serious love relationship nor has she ever thought deeply about the implications of marriage. She sincerely believes that all it takes to have a successful marriage is to be married to a young spouse of modest means.

It is important to consider the true nature of Adah's naivete and her juvenile interpretations of love, marriage, and "life outside school" (as the narrator calls it), because without such consideration it becomes quite inviting to blame Emecheta for what looks like her endorsement of the young Adah's seemingly amoral manipulation of Francis, especially with regard to their marriage. Brown, for example, suggests that "the casualness with which Adah enters and describes her loveless marriage is the more striking when we remember her own invectives against parents who sell their daughters into loveless matches for the profit of the bride price, and even more disconcertingly, neither Adah nor Emecheta seems aware of or concerned about the apparent inconsis-

tency."⁷ One suspects, however, that in a scene such as this one Brown is asking Emecheta to impose a point of view that would have been totally incongruous with Adah's immaturity at the time of Adah's wedding. It is only if we assume that the novelist is using the narrator to describe events as they should have been, instead of as they happened to Adah, that we will agree with the view that Adah should have been presented at the outset as being less dependent, less manipulative, and less manipulable.

At the time of their wedding, Adah is shown as a young woman who, with no home to live in, imagines that a seemingly ambitious and modest young man like Francis will ultimately provide protection, shelter and, maybe, love for her. It is also implied that that it is Adah's artlessness that makes her equate happiness in marriage with youth and unhappiness in marriage with old spouses. Indeed, it is only when we consider Adah's lack of experience at the beginning that most of her subsequent shocks, disappointments, and eventual independence make sense. Adah's initial naivete explains why this otherwise bright woman has to depend upon her less astute husband and in-laws—people who rely so much on her for financial sustenance—for intellectual and other forms of guidance.

But, although this type of situation continues for the greater part of *Second Class Citizen*, it becomes obvious that by the end of the novel Adah demonstrates that in order to become both the good writer and independent human being that she hopes to become, she has to free herself from the exploitative relationship between herself and Francis, create her own identity and, in general, try to understand human relationships better. Thus, in the end, Adah asserts her independence in a way which shows that she is now ready to be in complete control of her own and her children's lives. The scene is in the family court in London and Francis, who has been charged with assaulting Adah, resorts to all kinds of mean tricks (including denying paternity of their children) in order to avoid payment of alimony. Here is how the narrator describes Adah's reaction: "Francis said they had never been married. He then asked Adah if she could produce the marriage certificate. Adah could not. She could not even produce her passport and the children's birth certificates. Francis had burnt them all. To him Adah and the children ceased to exist. Francis told her this in court in low tones and in their language. . . . Something happened to Adah then. It was like a big hope and a kind of energy charging into her, giving her so much strength even though she was physically ill with her fifth child. Then she said very loud and very clear, "*Don't worry sir. The children are mine and that is enough. I shall never let them down as long as I am alive*" (191; my emphasis). The finality in the tone of voice and the determined manner in which Adah decides to formally accept responsibility for the children (which had always been hers anyway) are decidedly different from her behavior in most of the earlier scenes, situations in which she was invariably portrayed as a compliant character. She obviously understands now that she was totally wrong in looking up to Francis as a source of support; she also realizes that if she

⁷Brown 45.

wants to succeed in both her creative endeavors and in the rearing of her children she has to take full control of her life. From this moment henceforth, one cannot imagine either the narrator saying of Adah (as on previous occasions) that "she simply accepted her role as defined for her by her husband" (104) or Adah herself relying on the unworthy Francis (or any man for that matter) as she had previously done.

As a novel of personal development, *Second Class Citizen* is quite successful in the depiction of Adah's growth from the initial stage of naivete and ignorance to her final stage of self-realization and independence. She starts confronting the well-known tests usually set for all protagonists of apprenticeship novels when upon her arrival in England which, as we know, she had always equated with heaven, she is given only a "cold welcome" (39). But Adah's initial introduction to the British weather, landscape, and people is nothing compared to the other forms of initiation she goes through as she continues her stay in England. She has hardly overcome her first real shock over the legendary lack of warmth in England when she is faced with an even greater shock. i.e., learning to live in the hovel which Francis (now referred to as the "new Francis" by the narrator) shows her as their new home in London.

The protagonist gradually learns that coming to England is not and should not necessarily be the pinnacle of one's dream. She gets to know, through her experiences with the children's nanny Trudy that some British people can be just as dishonest and irresponsible as people anywhere else. Adah becomes aware of the true nature of racism when, together with Francis, she goes house hunting in London. She is also exposed to petty jealousy and envy from some of her fellow Nigerians living in London. These characters (who include the landlord and landlady of the Ashdown Street house), out of spite and malice, do all they can to bring Adah down to the inferior level they have partly allowed society to relegate them to. It is thus evident that, because of their hateful attitude toward Adah, these characters (who should otherwise have been helping the young woman) qualify for the roles of "faux-destinateurs" or detractors of the main character. As Susan Suleiman points out in an essay on the structure of the apprenticeship novel, in almost all novels of this type, there is always at least one character who, instead of helping the protagonist, will serve as an impediment to the latter's progress. In addition, there also are other structural categories--"destinateurs" and "adjuvants" on the one hand and "opposants" and "faux-destinateurs" on the other--who, as their names suggest, will also either serve as positive guides or hindrances to the protagonist.⁸

It is also clear that Francis, Adah's husband, is her leading "opposant" or opponent. But before discussing Francis's role as Adah's chief opponent, I must refer to a basic weakness in Emecheta's writing style--a weakness which, I suspect, makes it difficult for some critics to recognize the artistic distance

⁸Susan Suleiman, "La Structure d'apprentissage," *Poétique* 37 (1979): 24-42.

Emecheta creates between herself and Adah. Again, as Lloyd Brown asserts, Emecheta's criticisms of African men "are often marred by generalizations that are too shrill and transparently overstated to be altogether convincing."⁹ I will refer to two examples to back up this assertion: when Francis endorses his father's disapproval of Adah going to study in Britain, the narrator comments that "Francis was an African through and through. A much more civilized man would probably have found a better way of saying this to his wife. But to him, he was the male, and he was right to tell her what she was going to do" (30). The narrative voice here certainly seems to be that of the adult (and presumably more mature) Adah; we therefore cannot understand why she makes such a stupid remark. In another episode, the narrator tries to convey Francis's unwillingness to support his wife but, as in the first example, Emecheta succeeds only in conveying the impression that she endorses racial stereotypes about black men by suggesting that if only Francis were an Englishman, he would know how to treat his wife with love and respect (179). Surely, Emecheta knows that selfishness and inconsideration are not innate traits of African men, nor are supportive behavior and common decency toward one's spouse peculiar to English men. But, despite these and other obvious fallacies of hasty and inaccurate generalizations, it is true that Francis is Adah's leading opponent in *Second Class Citizen*.

Using descriptions that inevitably allow Francis to degenerate into a caricature, Emecheta depicts him (with good reason) as being one of the most unredeemable villains in African literature. In scenes that are too numerous to elaborate upon here, Francis is shown to be self-centered, cruel, narrow-minded, and in fact downright venal. Instead of helping Adah to develop the creative potential which she obviously has (and part of which she uses to support him), Francis only proves himself to be an obstacle on her route toward self-improvement. Because he is so selfish and greedy, Francis readily agrees with his parents' decision that Adah should remain working in Lagos to support him and his parents while he is "studying" in London. When (after outmaneuvering Francis's mother) Adah finally joins Francis in England, she quickly realizes that if Francis had been dependent, lazy, and manipulative in Lagos, he becomes even worse overseas. He is correctly shown as an irresponsible parent, spouse, and student. As was mentioned earlier, he brutalizes Adah, deliberately tries to inject a feeling of inferiority into her and, when all that fails, he tries to deprive her of what she values most—her children and her potential to become a writer.

It is also true, however, that toward the end of the story Adah fully recognizes Francis's absolute lack of love for her as well as the need for her own freedom. She is greatly assisted in this regard by another cast of characters who, in different ways, help her on the path toward the knowledge of her self-worth. Several of these characters (such as her boss at the Finchley Road library, Mrs. Konrad, and Mr. Okpara, the Nigerian who repeatedly urges Francis to smarten up) belong to the structural category often referred to as

⁹Brown 36.

"adjuvants," i.e., those characters who guide the protagonist of a novel of personal development on the right path. But one "adjuvant" who is of particular note is Bill, the bibliophile from Canada. He is the character who not only encourages Adah to read several African and other literary works, but who also literally guides her on the path of becoming a writer. Nor surprisingly, the narrator remarks that "Bill was the first real friend [Adah] had had outside her family" (167).

The success of *Second Class Citizen* as a literary work rests largely on Emecheta's evocation of childhood and its concomitant problems. The work is also very good in its depiction of a young woman who not only tries to survive in rather hostile environments (both domestic and elsewhere), but who does in the end acquire her personal independence. But, on balance, this Emecheta novel loses some of its strength because of the way it is inadequately structured. Emecheta demonstrates a pitfall common among writers of the bildungsroman by blatantly intruding to pour what looks like personal venom in the text. Because the narrator is nearly always prepared only to explain ways in which Francis brings disappointment to Adah, we are never made to see most of the other characters in full perspective. Some characters who play very important roles (such as Bill and Mr. Okpara) are not developed as they otherwise should have been.

Notwithstanding these minor aesthetic blemishes, *Second Class Citizen* can and should be seen as a powerful example of the bildungsroman in Africa. This novel does not match Emecheta's later, more sophisticated, and more overtly feminist works such as *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977) and especially *The Joys of Motherhood* (1982). It is also true, however, that the novelist's sustained attention to the themes of individual growth, progress, development, and the coherence of selfhood—all of which have pervaded her later writings and for which she received genuine and well-deserved critical acclaim—have their roots in this early piece. Thus, even just this reason would have been enough for me to agree at least partly with Katherine Frank's assertion that "the best place to approach Emecheta's fiction is with neither her first nor her last book, but with" *Second Class Citizen*.¹⁰

¹⁰Frank 479.