

Buchi Emecheta, a Feminist with a Small ‘f’ or a Motherist with a Big ‘M’?

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Abstract:

The present paper attempts to investigate the ‘degree’ of feminism in the works of the prolific Nigerian female novelist, Buchi Emecheta. She, who defines herself as a feminist with a small ‘f’, scrutinises the evolution of the African woman, struggling to break free from the bounds of traditions and to enter modernity. In *In the Ditch*, *Second Class Citizen*, and *The Joys of Motherhood*, that are dealt with in this article, the writer depicts the sufferance of women in traditional patriarchal societies and their battles to get out to modernity, where, unfortunately they face other difficulties. Emecheta defends women, but does not reject men – the father, the brother, the husband; she calls for women’s freedom, but not without their children. She spans the experiences from traditional Ibo life in Nigeria to modern Western milieu in England, stressing more on the status of the mother than on the condition of the woman. So, a feminist or a motherist? Emecheta has rejected the former concept; would she accept the latter?

Keywords: Emecheta; feminism; womanism; Motherism; African literature; female writers.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Female writers have long been invisible in literary criticism. Their products, when they happen to come out, never find a highway. Nevertheless, their perseverance has not been fruitless. Women’s writing is a way of speaking, of imposing their voice, thus a way of breaking the social codes that traditionally used to confine them into a well elaborated, silenced exclusion. It is also a form of violent denunciation, an affirmation of the female being at a large scale, socially, and historically...

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At the same time, the female writer integrates all the ‘disorder’ she causes within the social codes into a self-quest, a self-affirmation based on particular experiences that enrich her view on the world, on life, so far neglected and marginalised. Whatever genre, style or perspective, women’s writings contribute to impose their voice in the literary world, otherwise male dominated.

Through her battle, the female novelist expresses her desire to go where she is not expected, getting rid of the social, traditional codes and refusing both to be the ‘Other’ and to submit to the ‘Other’. She develops a sort of heroic attitude. As states the Italian M.R.Cutrufelli, quoted by Ghebalou, “les mots qui naissent du silence féminin doivent donc nécessairement rompre les règles et les conventions culturelles.” (165).

In Africa, the situation has not been different. Florence Stratton has well defended the case in her *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) where she pleads the fact that neither literary criticism, nor critical journals devote enough room – if any – to women writers until the late 1980s while a myriad of women like Grace Ogot, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, and Buchi Emecheta, have already had many publications to their credit. Even Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, who gives an image of a feminist through his support of class struggles in his novels, does not refer to any woman in his *Writing Against Neo – Colonialism*, where he classifies the African literature since WWII into three ages. Stratton reports, “Ngugi claims in a note that the terms ‘he’ and ‘his’, which he uses throughout the essay to refer to the ‘writer’, are not meant to denote the ‘maleness’ of a person. But this is precisely what they do. [...] works like Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) and Emecheta’s *the Joys of Motherhood* (1979) do not fit [his] three ages’ theory.” (9)

Yet, the aim of this paper is not to deem the critics’ position, but rather to demonstrate how one of these authors, the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta (1944 – 2017), who has “since 1981, displayed the greatest upward mobility” (Lindfors, 12), intends to express the concerns of African women struggling to break free from their traditional role as mute objects

within a male dominated environment. Here, one would soon categorise her within the conventional feminist frame in terms of feminist struggle. However, like many other African female authors, Emecheta simply refused to be considered so, according to the western paradigms because, as the critic Ife Amadiume puts it, “Whereas ‘militant feminism’ is a comparatively new phenomenon in the Western world, it has been a constant reality for women in traditional Igbo societies.”(10) The socio cultural parameters not being the same, the historical turmoil and evolution being very different, African women’s claim can in no way be similar to the Westerners’. For the former, “true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self – reliant. The majority of black women in Africa and in the Diaspora have developed these characteristics, though not always by choice.” (Steady 35)

2. A Long Hard Way

Buchi Emecheta is one of these African women in the Diaspora who have developed this determination for self – reliance. Born in 1944, she figures among the first educated generation of independent Nigeria. Orphaned at an early age, she was brought up in an extended family as was common in the traditional African societies where schooling was not the girls’ lot. Nevertheless, she managed to get education. However, given the hardships and the custom - bound conditions, she had to leave school at the age of sixteen to get married. Later, as it was fashion among the youths in the 1960s and 70s, she and her husband moved to England. There, she worked in a library while studying sociology at London University. Her writing career started with a series of articles published in *The New Statesman Magazine*, a British cultural review that has recognised and published many critics and writers. In 1972, these articles were published as a novel titled *in the Ditch*, followed by *Second Class Citizen* in 1974. These two novels which were combined into *Adah’s Story* in 1983 are largely considered to be autobiographical.

Being “the first African writer to dare render the private very public in her autobiographical works where she superbly melds the ‘granite of facts’ with the ‘rainbows of dreams’” (Opara 250), Emecheta has introduced a

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new dimension of the female portrayal in African literary history, other than that of a housemaid or prostitute prevailing in most of male writers’ novels. She deals with both the woman in the traditional dogma and the ‘new woman’ in the twentieth century changing Nigerian society; a woman facing the hardships of modern life. Her female characters are depicted as victims who struggle in a way or another for self – affirmation through freedom from oppression. They very often evolve in an environment of despair, of unhappiness due to poverty, violence, burden of traditions such as barrenness, or even to the new paradigms of modern life that are not always easy to integrate.

In her first novel, *In the Ditch* (1972), Emecheta relates the African migrants’ living conditions in London with the help of the Welfare State. ‘The ditch’ refers to the unhealthy, dirty flats, named the Pussy-Cat Mansion, where families in trouble are dwelt. These families are mostly women – widows or separated wives – with children, and unmarried mothers. Adah Obi, the central character, is an Igbo girl, who, like many young people of her generation, is attracted by the European dream. She joins her husband who has already gone to London where they want to bring up their children while studying for higher degrees. Disillusionment does not last to come. The situation in England is not the same as in Nigeria. Frustrated by the many hardships that hinder their dreams and their plans, the couple separates, and Adah finds herself in the Pussy – cat Mansions with her children.

In this milieu, Emecheta has been able to go deep in the feminine experience, as the families of the Mansions are all fatherless. First, she reacts against the dole provided to the families because she sees that in a way, it encourages home breakings and that it also lets women give free course to their sexual life and have more children, which, of course, does not embellish their living conditions. At the same time, she attacks the British authorities not only for the bad accommodation, but also for the will to ‘control’ the life of these women that cause a ‘population explosion’ by not allowing them to have ‘fancy men’ who would eventually be asked to

“help with the support of the mum [...] the women not only had to be poor, but they had to be sex starved too. Their chances of marrying or remarrying were reduced to almost nil” (The Ditch 69). Most of the women portrayed here are mothers, but, contrary to what is found in male authors’ novels, they are neither romanticised, nor idealised. Emecheta, in the words of Marie Umeh, “Rather than simply portraying the African woman symbolically as part of the warm and secure African past, (she) offers faithful portrayals, patterns of self – analysis and general insights into the female psyche, ignored by, or inaccessible to African male writers” (190). Through Adah, the author has not only described facts and events, but she has gone deep in the psyche of the character so as to reveal her feelings and thoughts during her battle to get out of the ditch.

3. The Birth of a Feminist

In her second novel, *Second Class Citizen* (1974), Emecheta takes back Adah to Nigeria to dive into her childhood and move through her difficult schooling, her marriage and with her in – laws, till her migration to England where both her dreams and her marriage fall apart. Here, the novelist displays the flow and the conditions of the Igbo woman’s life since her birth – a birth that is not always welcomed for a girl. All that Adah can remember of her childhood is that “all started with a dream” (7), a dream of a little girl who does not even know her age.

She was not even quite sure that she was exactly eight because, you see, she was a girl. She was a girl who arrived when everyone was expecting a boy. So, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was insignificant. (7)

Right from the first page of the novel, the writer announces her feminist trend: a neglected girl who has dreams, that is a girl who already thinks of taking another way than the traditional beaten track. She is bored with the routine life; a “thought suddenly struck” her, “she would go to school” (10) because her brother, younger than her, is schooled, but not her. School is not for her. Therefore, she has to take the reins by herself. “I came

to school – my parents would not send me” (12), she tells the teacher who kindly accepts her in the Methodist school, although she knows that in case her parents knew about this, they would punish her, mainly her mother. This is what happens. Nevertheless, Adah wins her first battle, “she felt triumphant, especially when she heard Pa’s friend advising him to make sure he allowed (her) to start school soon.” (13) The triumph does not last long; the father dies and the family is discarded. The mother is ‘inherited’ by her husband’s brother whom she must marry and the children have to live with uncles and cousins. The boy stays in his father’s family while the girl is sent to live with the family of her mother’s brother.

4. The Great Battle

A new battle starts for Adah. All the money left by her father is devoted to her brother’s education. Yet, it is decided that she would stay at school – an inferior one, of course- her bride price will be higher. At her uncle’s, she lives more as an unpaid servant than as an adopted orphan. She undergoes the situation courageously as she knows that

Nobody was interested in her for her own sake, only in the money she would fetch, and the housework she could do and happy at being given this opportunity of survival, (she) did not waste time thinking about its rights or wrongs. She had to survive (19).

Survival! This is what the struggling girl is thinking of so as to realise her dreams. She has to earn everything by herself. No penny is spent on her education, but everybody is waiting for the money she would bring to the family through the dowry her future husband would pay for her. It has happened to her to dream of marrying a rich man so that she would take her mother and her brother in charge. But now, she resists the idea of marrying “any man, rich or poor, to whom she would have to serve his food on bended knees. She would not consent to live with a husband whom she would have to treat as a master and refer to as ‘Sir’ even behind his back”

(20). Thanks to her perseverance, Adah, the Igbo Tigress, manages to enter secondary school with the ambition of reaching Ibadan University.

Still a teenager when she ends her five years secondary school that she has spent in a boarding house, Adah finds herself homeless. Her desire to move further in studies is very strong, but “to read for a degree [...] one needed a home [...] a good quiet atmosphere where she could study in peace.” (25) There is no way for a sixteen-year-old girl to have her own home in Nigeria, so, “Adah had to marry”, but she will not do that in her family. She marries a young man who is “too poor to pay five hundred pounds’ bride – price.” (25) Emecheta, the feminist, breaks a chain ring of the traditions. Adah’s family who have relied upon her high dowry due to her long stay at school, do not get anything.

Adah’s marriage seems to open the way for her dreams to come true; her high salary as a librarian at the US consulate would allow that. She starts planning that with her husband only to find that she has again to negotiate because “she is married and so is subsumed completely to her husband’s people – her earnings, her attention and her entire self” (Darko 58). The decision is not theirs, but his father’s who “does not approve of women going to the UK” (30). The deal is that only Francis goes and Adah must “stay in Nigeria, finance her husband, give his parents expensive gifts, look after her young children” (30). This is a great frustration, but she can in no way argue. It is useless, her husband’s long studies have changed nothing in his behaviour; he is “an African through and through” (30). Once again, she stands on her feet instead of falling in. She decides to draw another plan and be “as cunning as a serpent but as harmless as a dove” (30) and she succeeds to convince her parents-in-law to let her join her husband with the promise to continue financing them.

5. Disillusionment and Negotiation

A cold welcome is the title of the chapter that deals with Adah’s arrival to England. Cold is the weather; cold is her husband’s attitude. This is a premise to the hardships she is going to go through and that will lead to her marriage break-up. The heaven she has dreamt of is actually hell: a one-

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room flat in a gloomy building which she has to “share with such Nigerians who called her madam at home” (42), and a completely changed husband who becomes violent. When she protests against that such of accommodation, he reacts rudely,

You must know my dear lady, that in Lagos you may be a 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 second class citizen. (42-43).

The last utterance comes as a shock to Adah. It comes to confirm not only Francis’ acceptance of such a position, but also his will to impose it on her, as it is the case of all their neighbours.

A woman without a man has no identity. This is one of the basic concepts of the Igbo culture and tradition in which Adah has grown up. Therefore, instead of fleeing or showing her disappointment and anger, she decides to save her family; she again negotiates. She devotes herself, her money to support her husband in order to make of him a successful man, but all that she receives in return is being treated as an object of his self -satisfaction. Yet the combative Adah resists. She resists when he wants her to work in a shirt factory while her “several ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels and [...] a part of the British Library Association Professional Certificate” she owns allow her be a librarian assistant, which she gets. She resists the complex of inferiority that her husband and his Nigerian neighbours live with. She resists his lack of trust and his male chauvinism. “Who is going to look after your children for you? Francis asked [...] I can’t go on looking after your children for you.” (49) Adah is frightened when he refers to the children as hers, not theirs; in Igbo tradition, the children are their mother’s when they are bad. Nevertheless, she still resists and refuses to foster her children as the other Nigerian families do as soon as they arrive in England. As a strong African woman, Adah wants to save her marriage and achieve her ideals within her family. But when her husband burns her manuscript-her “brain child”, she knows that there is nothing to save, “that to Adah was

the last straw. Francis could not kill her child; she could forgive him all that he had done but not this” (187).

6. Motherhood: A Curse or a Blessing?

Second Class Citizen is undoubtedly the most complete novel of Emecheta. The author depicts a life - long African woman’s experiences at different stages of life, in different cultural environments, and in a variety of circumstances, which she has finally overcome. She says, “It is a curse to be an orphan, a double curse to be a black one in a white country, an unforgivable calamity to be a woman with five kids but without a husband. The whole life had been like that of a perpetually unlucky gambler” (*In the Ditch*). *Second Class Citizen* should have been the first novel because it ends where *in the Ditch* – written first – starts. Adah, the protagonist of both novels evolves between two cultures. Apart from her struggle at home for education, the key of emancipation, in England she has to face a double alienation, both from the English and the Africans. Adah is ‘the Other’ because she is breaking the already set stereotypes as an African, as a woman and as an immigrant; therefore, her strategies of resistance must be multiple. Her power resides in her motherhood – another criterion of a good Ibo woman. Through her motherhood, she finds her ‘self’ although the multiple child - bearing has been imposed on her by her sexist husband. Adah is not the feminist who fights for her economic independence or equality of rights; she does not “want something more than [her] husband and [her] children and [her] home (Friedan 141). She wants to accomplish her dreams with her husband and her children and her home. It is only when a link of this chain –the husband –has broken that she sets her freedom.

Motherhood is one of the pillars for an African woman to be fulfilled. “Mother is Gold”; “Mother is Supreme” says a Nigerian dictum. It is to his mother’s people that Okonkwo in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* turns when he is banished from his village. Emecheta deals exclusively with the theme of motherhood in her fifth novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Marie Umeh cites Margaret Daymond who “notes that by the time of the *Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta has given new meaning to the traditional silence of women when the protagonist, Nnu Ego, uses ‘chosen silence’ as a weapon –

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a woman who is not silenced, but ‘silent’” (279). Indeed, in this novel, completely set in Nigeria, Emecheta breaks the myth of the idealised cherished mother so long portrayed by her predecessors, mainly male writers, hence, the ironic title. The story is that of a woman who is very happy to have children and who finally finds that “a woman with many children could face a lonely old age and maybe a miserable death, all alone, just like a barren woman” (Joys 215).

In this novel, the writer returns to Nigeria where she sets her story. She depicts a panel of women characters, each with her experience in a male dominated society. They all revolve around the powerful Nwokochi Agbadi, the future father of the heroine, who “was sure to come back with the best looking women” (10) whenever his village attacks another one. Women are part of the spoils of war. He chooses them from the highest ranks, daughters of rich men or of chiefs of the villages to make of them his slaves, his wives, or mistresses, whom he requires to be able to “match his arrogance, his biting sarcasm, his painful jokes, and also, when the mood called, his human tenderness” and whom he would abandon as soon as they “sink into domesticity and motherhood” (10). The women, here, are portrayed as objects of pleasure. They are silenced and do not appear in the novel except for Ona, Agbadi’s favourite mistress, the future mother of Nnu Ego, the protagonist.

Ona is the favourite daughter of a chief, Obi Umunna, who, not having any living son, decides that she is free to have any man, but must never marry. She belongs to her father, and in case she bears a son – which he deeply hopes - it will belong to him, too. Emecheta describes Ona as proud, stubborn, beautiful, and free. But the freedom she enjoys is not really her decision. The fact that “she refused to live with Agbadi” (11) is simply because her father wants her to return home every day. Yet Ona’s strength as a woman in such a patriarchal environment lies in the way she manages her ‘belonging’ to two strong men, her father and her lover. Her father’s favours prevent her from being attracted by Agbadi’s wealth and her arrogance goes not only to the point of refusing to marry him, but

“many a night, she would send him away, saying she did not feel like having anything to do with him” (11). These are humiliating words a woman cannot tell a man; Ona dares!

The rudeness Ona shows hides a soft, sweet heart. It is a shield she uses to protect herself in a misogynist society just like a chameleon changes colours to hide from predators. When Agbadi is injured, in a hunting expedition, “the more vulnerable personality underneath her daily steely mask came out” (14). When she hurries to enquire about her lover, she is first ignored by the men carrying him because at the same time she is attractive, she is hated, to be finally rudely answered, “In life you tortured him, teased him with your body. Now that he is dead, you cry for his manhood” (14). This does not discourage her, she “fought and clawed to be allowed to stay and would let no one touch Agbadi except herself” (15). His legal wives are put away. Here, Emecheta does not portray a strong woman in Ona as much as she portrays Agbadi’s arrogance and machismo. He treats his women, even his legal wives, as mere objects he would throw away as soon as they are overused. Ona does not want to fall into such a situation, and for this, she is lucky to be protected by another man – her father. However, during her long stay with her convalescent lover, she gets pregnant and gives birth to a baby girl they name Nnu Ego. In spite of her compromise with Agbadi to stay with him in case they have a daughter-since her father wants a boy- when time comes, she alters her mind. The freedom and arrogance of Ona parallel the ‘obliteration’ of the legal wives. They do not appear in the novel, except for Agunwa, Agbadi’s senior wife who appears only to be ill and later dies. The author wants, through Agunwa, to expose the silent suffering conditions of women in polygamous societies. Being the senior wife and having born many sons, Agunwa should have been loaded with flowers. Instead, she is subdued to watch Ona—a mistress- caring for her own husband without being able to say a word or even approach him. She dies; Emecheta recalls her ancestors’ rites.

7. Faith and Beliefs

Ona’s pregnancy is revealed on the same day of Agunwa’s funerals. As the custom, all that she possesses, including her personal servant, has to

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be buried with her. The poor slave girl refuses to jump into the grave and begs for her life, so she is killed. Before she dies, she warns Agbadi, “I shall come back to your household, but as a legitimate daughter, I shall come back...” (23). It is after this that Ona returns to her father’s compound where she bears her daughter, who comes with a lump on her head. At the age of two, the child starts suffering. The diagnosis made up by the ‘dibia’- the traditional medicine man- is attributed to the killed slave girl. The remedy is to take Nnu Ego to her father’s and make her worship her ‘chi’ –the soul that guides her life- so as to appease the spirit of the dead slave. This is done and she heals. Soon Ona gives birth to a son, but they both die. On her death bed, Ona pleads Agbadi “to allow [Nnu Ego] to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. [to] allow her be a woman” (28). She regrets her ‘free’ life which she fails. Not only does she die, but the son, who would make of her a fulfilled woman, dies too. She is ‘punished’ for her freedom and for having ruined other women’s lives. In a way or another, in a patriarchal society, it is women who bear the brunt of bigoted traditional practices. The spirit of the massacred slave girl will haunt Nnu Ego over her life.

Keeping to Ona’s words on her death bed, Agbadi marries Nnu Ego when she comes of age. The ceremony is held in a large scale gaiety. The bridegroom’s family thanks Agbadi; they are happy because the girl is virgin and “when a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive” (31). Her people also show their pride, “Nnu Ego has not shamed us. We pray that in less than ten months our in-laws will come and thank us again for the birth of her baby” (31). The new married couple starts a happy life which does not last to turn upside down. The expected baby does not come. “Just make sacrifices to that slave woman and pay your father a visit. He may have a suggestion to make”, suggests Amatokwo, Nnu Ego’s husband. But she does not want to bother her father with what she considers her failure; “I am sure the fault is on my side” (31). She does not even bother her husband anymore; she no more voices her doubts and worries to him; the

problem is “hers alone”. Secretly, she visits different dibias who assert to her that her chi - the slave girl- would give her no child.

The couple’s relationship falls apart; when Nnu Ego is addressed to, it is only for the farming work. “If you cannot produce sons, at least you can harvest yams”, notes her husband, who takes a new wife and soon starts having sons. Although she has lost her first class position as a senior wife, Nnu Ego stays at her husband’s to avoid bringing shame on her family. She helps her co-spouse nursing the baby to whom she secretly gives her breast until her husband discovers that and beats her. Informed, her father takes her home. He has ill-treated so many women, “But when it came to his daughter, she must have a man who would cherish her” (36). He returns the bride price and finds a new husband to Nnu Ego. She does not protest; she is rather pleased because “when one grows old, one needs children to look after one. If you have no children, and your parents have gone, who can you call your own?” (38). A standard saying transmitted by the elders claims that a lonely woman can never be accomplished.

Without knowing, or even seeing, her to-be-husband, Nnu Ego is sent to him in Lagos where he works for a British couple. Nothing in that man named Nnaife pleases her, neither his physical appearance, nor his job, “a man who washes women’s underwear” (49). She is despised, but she comes “to accept him as one of the inevitabilities of fate” (49). Emecheta draws a picture of how the proud men of Ibo land lose their pride when they work in town, they fall in “le complexe de dépendence du colonisé” (Fanon 81). Yet, their arrogance towards their wives is not altered. During a hard discussion, Nnaife reminds Nnu Ego that he is her owner since he has paid her bride price. He has paid money for her, therefore, she must accept everything from him; he does not have to change for her. Anyway, Nnu Ego is living a great experience-the joy of her life. She is pregnant, but she keeps silent to her husband until he notices that. Her dream of being a mother is coming true. Expecting some happy support from her husband, the latter says, “I am happy to know that I am a man, yes that I can make a woman pregnant [...] without me you could not be carrying that child” (50-51). All the honours are for him. No matters, now he is sure she will not

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want to quit him as she has threatened many times. Convinced by her husband's words, she interiorises the idea of his supremacy saying to herself, "Yes, without what he has, you could never become a mother" (51). She plays the role of a 'good' wife, at the service of her man, but she still cannot understand that difference between men in Ibuza and those in Lagos who behave like slaves.

Men here are too busy being white men's servants to be men. [...] their manhood has been taken from them. The shame of it is that they don't know. [...] They are all slaves, including us. If their masters treat them badly, they take it out on us. The only difference is that they are given some pay for their work, instead of having been bought. (51)

While she depicts men as weakening in the town, Emecheta shows women as more responsible; they are resourceful. Aware of the requirements of urban life and their husbands' insufficient wages, they make their own business to improve the home income. With the help of women's fund, Nnu Ego, too makes her own.

8. A Mother, a Woman

Baby Ngozy has come. Nnu Ego is rapturous. Her petty trading is flourishing, which helps improve her home living conditions and provide her many outfits. Now she accepts Nnaife as the father of her son, the son who provides her the sense of fulfilment. Now she is a mother, she is a woman. "She was now sure, as she bathed her baby son and cooked for her husband, that her old age would be happy, that when she died, there would be somebody left behind to refer to her as 'mother'" (54). Unfortunately, this blessing does not last long. With no premise, on a morning she is getting ready to go to her stall, she finds the baby dead on her mat. Everything collapses, no more womanhood, no more motherhood. Emecheta describes a woman at the top of despair, having lost all her sense of reasoning and running straight to a bridge off which she wants to jump. She wants to die so as to meet her chi who has taken her baby. Beyond her

lost baby, it is more the sense of failure that can be understood through the suicide attempt. When her saviours blame her, she shouts, “But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore” (62). The author stresses the responsibility put upon woman, even by another woman. “You have a baby at home yet you come here disgracing the man who paid for you to be brought into this town”, shouted an Ibo woman who slapped her (62). Emecheta, here, points out how it is women who ‘keep’ to their submission to their husbands, their owners.

Child bearing - rather sons bearing - is what makes a woman be a woman. Nnu Ego starts loving her husband only after the birth of their son. The three widows of Nnaife’s brother continue their lives differently. They are all inherited by their brother-in-law. The senior wife stays in her dead husband’s compound with her sons; the middle wife goes back to her parents because she is childless; the younger one, Adaku, mother of a girl prefers joining her new husband in Lagos, fleeing from the ill-treatment she would undergo for not having a son. Through the character of Adaku, Emecheta introduces a hint of feminist attitude. Adaku shows more self-confidence than Nnu Ego does and she even reproaches her to be “more traditional than the people at home in Ibuza” and to “worry too much to please [their] husband” (127) when Nnu Ego expresses her fear that Nnaife will not like her new born twin girls.

Nnu Ego and Adaku are a sort of Mariam Bâ’s Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in *So Long a Letter*. In time of hardships, Nnu Ego and Ramatoulaye try to manage with respect to traditions while Adaku and Aissatou prefer to stand on their own legs. “I realise that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. We make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So, I have to set my own” (170), replies Adaku to Nnu Ego when the latter advises her to be patient; she could have a son. Later, she adds, “I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters” (171). This is what she does; illustrating many African feminists’ view that education is the only way for emancipation. Meanwhile, Nnu Ego puts her own daughters on her footsteps by constantly reminding them that they are girls and so

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they have to help in the chores and take care of their brothers who are freed from domestic activities. Emecheta symbolises the personalities of this pair of women in the fact that while Nnu Ego is chilled in their “stuffy and stinking room” (168), lamenting at the top of despair, “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” (186), Adaku hires a “separate room of her own, much bigger than the one they all shared before.” (171) She puts her daughters at school so that their father will not “send them away to any husband before they are ready. I will see that”, she says (168). To end all, Adaku gets husband- free and evolves in Lagos while Nnu Ego returns to Ibuza where she lives with her own people, being rejected by her husband, neglected by her sons and receiving help only from her daughters.

9. A Woman’s View on Women

In the three novels dealt with in this paper, Emecheta displays a sample of how African women are marginalised and oppressed. She shows this through a female’s eye, denouncing the archaic patriarchal customs that persist not only in the urbanised areas of Nigeria, but also in Europe, as it is the case in *Second Class Citizen*. She burdens so much the men, mainly the husbands and the fathers with such rude attitudes towards the women that the novels take a biased trend towards the female characters, who are the victims, the ones who suffer the most of whatever bad situation. She explains this by saying,

What I am doing is writing social documentary novels, based upon what I have seen and experienced in my part of Africa. If the men folk think this is Feminism, then I am a feminist. But whatever they think would not deter me from writing about what I see, and how I feel that marriage should not be the only career left to women, it should be one of the careers; and that if it fails, the woman should not be labelled a social failure and be rejected. (*A Nigerian* 117)

Emecheta has always written in the favour of modern women and the way they struggle to get rid of the chains that bind them to the traditions. Yet, her commitment does not reach the point of a revolution. She always lets room to her heroines to choose the way they want to emancipate.

In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah, the heroine has to fight at a variety of levels -as a child, as an adolescent, as a wife and a mother, and as a migrant. Every time, she has to find a way of reaching her aim; she has to use stratagems to overcome the tensions between tradition and modernity, which Obioma Nnaemeka refers to as ‘Negofeminism’ that she defines as “the feminism of negotiation”. According to her, “African feminism challenges through negotiation, accommodation, and compromise” (280). “It knows when, where, and how to denote patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines” (378). This is what Adah does when she supports her in-laws, satisfying all their material needs so as to ‘buy’ her freedom to go to England. It is only when she promises to continue supporting them by sending money that they let her go. Once in London, she has also to negotiate her being in front of her husband. She does not want to affirm herself as a feminist, but simply as a woman who wants the best for her family. Emecheta says, “I don’t subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive and we must reject them. Some of these men are my brothers and fathers and sons. Am I to reject them, too?”⁷ Nevertheless, both Adah and Adaku reject their respective husbands to gain their freedom and fulfil themselves.

In the *Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego, just like Adah in *Second Class Citizen*, faces a great deal of hardships she has to overcome. But this time, it is within the traditional male dominated Nigerian society that is in transition due to the changes brought by colonisation. Tradition and modernity are crossing swords; rural people enter the urban space. Nnu Ego and her co-spouse Adaku are symbols of this dichotomy. Adaku is presented as an independent woman who tries to convince the submissive Nnu Ego to react. “In promoting the feminist’s cause, Emecheta balances Nnu Ego’s traditionalism with Adaku’s tendencies toward female emancipation. Adaku’s ‘feminism’ is introduced in the novel when she initiates a strike by

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refusing Nnaife’s supper until he increases his wives’ food allowance.” (Umeh, 43) Nnu Ego takes part in the strike, but not for long. Adaku’s behaviour has some ‘feminist’ effect on Nnu Ego, but this stays at the level of thoughts. She becomes aware of the injustice she undergoes as a woman; she meditates, “when I lost my first son, I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband -and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? (187). She thinks, she knows, but she does not act. She continues hoping in her sons and subserving her daughters. Adaku goes away to give her daughters a good start.

This juxtaposition of two types of women is perpetuated through Nnu Ego’s girls. She has two pairs of twin-girls whom she brings up following her path although they are in Lagos. Her sons receive a good education for which she sweats to pay the fees while the girls occasionally learn to read and write. Each of the two pairs of twin-girls forms an antagonistic tandem. When time comes to marry the elders, one accepts the fiancé, an educated Ibo young man, chosen by her father while the other, not only refuses the one proposed by her father, but goes with a boy from the Yoruba, a rival tribe of the Igbo. As for the second pair, when the family returns home to Ibuza, one is left with her married sister in Lagos and the other is taken home.

10. Conclusion

“Although this book is valuable as a feminist work, it lacks strong feminist consciousness and ideology.” (Umeh, 44) Indeed, Emecheta’s feminist position is not that clear-cut. The main trend in her writings is to encourage women to break the bounds of traditional constraints and enter modernity. However, those of her protagonists who enter modernity, as Adah and Adaku, do so, on the expense of their family life. They quit their husbands but keep their children. Motherhood, the main criterion for a fulfilled Ibo woman is a point that Emecheta defends. Nevertheless, such women are rejected by the society, or at least not valued. The failing characters, like Nnu Ego, generally return home. So does Nnu Ego who

goes to live with her people after having sacrificed her youth for the welfare of her husband, bearing him children and working hard to provide the boys good education in spite of their father's absence and poverty. Her 'crime' is that one of 'her' daughters has disobeyed, so dishonoured the family and the boys on whom she has put her hopes have gone away. She has failed her emancipation, yet, before going back, she leaves one of her unmarried daughters in Lagos. Emecheta's position is rather ambivalent; in fact, she has never been at ease with the term 'feminist'. She writes, "I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, an African born, I see things from the African's woman's eye. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African woman I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist, then I am a feminist with a small 'f'" (Emecheta 175). Perhaps would she have preferred to be called a womanist or, given the importance she gives to motherhood, a motherist with a big 'M'.

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