

## Eradication of Racial and Gender Discrimination through Education in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*

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### **Abstract**

*Buchi Emecheta is an African feminist writer whose novels deal with the inequality of women in immigrant and African societies and explores the tension between tradition and modernity. In *Second Class Citizen*, she depicts the problems of discrimination faced by African women through the character of Adah. This paper focuses on how racial and gender discrimination could be eradicated through education. Adah is a determined girl who fought for her education when she was a young girl. Living in England had been a dream for her since childhood. But after moving to England she understood the reality of being discriminated both by the means of race and gender. Her education gave her secure first class citizen job as a librarian to run her family as the sole breadwinner. Lot of men from Africa moved to England with the dream of leading a successful life but had failed like Francis and Mr. Noble. But Adah as a woman had succeeded to survive and lead her life as a first class citizen amidst all problems through her education. Education gave her strength and courage to fight against the racial issues. Education is a process of enlightening the minds of people and developing a person's perspectives of the world. Adah being an educated woman did not accept of being a second class citizen. She always wanted to live as a first class citizen among the white people. Education gave empowerment to Adah which taught her to voice against racial and gender discrimination.*

**Keywords:** Race, Gender, Discrimination, Education

**Introduction:**

Buchi Emecheta is one of the prominent feminist literary figures in Africa. She is a Nigerian novelist based in U.K from 1962 who writes novels on the themes of racism, gender discrimination, child slavery, motherhood, female independence and freedom through education. Her noteworthy works are *Second Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). *Second Class Citizen* is a semi autobiographical novel about the story of Adah who overcomes racial and gender discrimination both in Africa and England. She had been at the receiving end of gender oppression in her native place and in England which she overcomes through education and by her revolutionary nature.

Racial notions are generally related to the colour of the skin. The colour of the skin determines who is superior and inferior. Every civilization has its good and bad facets. Though a civilization is well advanced in culture and other aspects, it has its own drawbacks like racial and gender discrimination. Women face double marginalization in this case. African women are oppressed at a great extent both under the name of race and gender issues. Emecheta depicts how African women are discriminated through the character of Adah in *Second Class Citizen*. This paper focuses on how education helps women in eradicating the racial and gender discrimination faced by them.

### **Discrimination in native Africa**

Adah, a determined young Igbo girl had been facing gender discrimination since her birth. While everyone in her family was expecting a boy, she was born with disappointment to her parents and the tribe. So none of them thought of recording her birth and she was treated as an insignificant one. But she knew that she was born during the Second World War. At the age of eight when her brother was given preference to be sent to school, she also wanted to go to school. Adah's mother said "A year or two would do, as long as she can write

her name and count. Then she will learn how to sew” (10). She used to take her brother to the school and watch the children from outside the gate.

“Adah would stand there, filled with envy. This envy later gave way to frustration, which she showed in small ways. She would lie, just for the joy of living; she took secret joy in disobeying her mother. Because, she thought to herself: If not for Ma, Pa would have seen to it that I started school with Boy” (11).

She was passionate in going to school. So she planned to sneak out of the house when her mother was careless. She took a broken slate from her house; corrected her oversized dress and ran out as fast as she could to the Methodist school which was around the corner of her house. She entered a classroom where her neighbour Mr. Cole was teaching. He let her into the class and made her sit near a boy. It was Mr. Cole who convinced her parents to send her to school. Later, she was punished for sneaking out and going to school. But she was firm in going to school. Seeing her indomitable nature, her parents sent her to school. When she grew up she went to Methodist Girl’s High School where she came in contact with European Missionaries.

After her father’s death, her mother was married to someone and Adah was sent to her uncle’s house as a servant. They agreed to send her to school again only for the high bride price that she would bring in if she was educated. When she was eleven, old men came asking for her as a bride. Only old baldies could afford a high bride price. She used to flatten the bike tyres of those men to avoid them coming to ask her. Her only aim was to get education.

Once in her school, she was discriminated by the Headmaster for smiling, while he was announcing about the list of secondary schools that the students could apply for. He asked the boys to back her up. Four tough looking boys held her tightly. He beat her severely

with the cane and the pain was unbearable. To ease her pain she bit the boy who was backing her up. Even after the caning stopped, she was still biting the boy with her sharp teeth into the boy's skin. All the teachers came and rescued him. This incident gave her the nickname Ibo tigress:

Some of her Yoruba classmates used to ask her what human flesh tasted like, because "You Ibos used to eat people, didn't you?" Well, Adah didn't know about the cannibalistic tendencies of her tribe; all she knew was that the headmaster's cane burnt her so much that she felt irrepressible urges to pass the pain to something else. Latifu, the boy who was doing the backing, happened to be the closest victim, so he had to take it. Adah also felt that she was unjustly punished. She had been smiling at the Presence, not the headmaster, and she suspected that the headmaster, and she suspected that the headmaster knew she was telling the truth; he had simply wanted to cane her, that was all (24 -25).

Next, Adah had to steal money to pay for the entrance examination fee. The entrance examination was for to join the school of her dreams. She buried the amount of two shillings given to her for buying meat. When it was exposed, she was caned severely for stealing money. She did not worry about the beatings. Her only thought was to pass the entrance exam. She not only passed the examination but also won the scholarship. After finishing her studies, she was married to Francis, a young graduate.

After her marriage, she was working for the American Consulate Library and earned sixty pounds which was a huge sum for her. Adah's earnings were spent on feeding the family, paying the rent, helping to pay school fees for Francis's seven sisters and paying for the maids. She bore a daughter to Francis and was pregnant with another child. At that time, Francis left to England to pursue studies. It was Adah who paid fees for his education. After a

few months, she also wanted to move to England. It was her dream to settle in England. She wanted to finish her course as a librarian and wanted to work there. She bribed her mother-in-law with the jewels she had to allow her to go to England. She spent extra money for the boat that would leave soon rather than going six months later at a lower cost. She felt her mother-in-law would change her mind if she waited for another few months. Since childhood, Adah had always dreamt of going to England and it had come true at last.

### **Discrimination in England**

Adah received a cold welcome when she arrived in England. The reality of England disappointed her imagination of it being a land of fantasies and luxuries. The reality she saw was dull and impassionate: “They looked remote, happy in an aloof way, but determined to keep their distance” (44). Francis had also changed a lot after living in England. He was commenting about the English people that they are the kind of people who would joke about death. When Adah opposed his idea and said that he was lying, Francis accused her that she had never said to him in her lifetime that he was lying. The sharpness in his voice said to her that “It is allowed for African males to come and get civilised in England. But that privilege has not been extended to females yet” (45). When Francis took her home, Adah was extremely shocked. It was such a compact space of only two small rooms. She was told by Francis that all the Coloured immigrant people had to live only in those kinds of places: “You see accommodation is very short in England, especially for black people with children. Everybody is coming to London. The West Indians, the Pakistanis and even the Indians, so that African students are usually grouped together with them. We are all blacks, all coloureds, and the only houses we can get are horrors like these” (46). On the top of it all, in the evening they had to share the houses with other illiterate Nigerians who worked in the factories. Some of them had the same educational background as their paid servants in Lagos. She did not want to live with them. She accused Francis of not being dutiful and not shifting them to

another house away from these people. This constant complaining of Adah rose his temper and he was about to slap her which frightened Adah. He would not have done that if they were in Lagos. He spoke out in anger:

“You must know my dear young 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 a second class citizen. So you can’t discriminate against your own people, because we are all second class” (48).

Francis got used by the term “second class” and started living upon and enjoying it. He even pressured Adah to work in the factory like her neighbours. After all the high grades she got in her school and with her British Library Association Professional Certificate, she will not go and work with the illiterate Yoruba people who could not even speak proper English. She was forced to take the job in the factory as any black housewife would do. But Adah refused to go. Meanwhile she got the job of a senior library assistant in North Finchley Library.

Adah was pregnant with the third child and still went to work to secure her job. There her colleagues made her feel inferior by talking about boyfriends and clothes. At the same time, she felt proud of her first class job and enjoyed the work. Francis was looking after the children for some period and later began to resent. The neighbours advised them to give the children away to foster parents. It was what most of the Nigerians did who settled in England with children: No one cared whether a woman was suitable or not, no one wanted to know whether the house was clean or not; all they wanted to be sure of was that the foster mother was white. The concept of “whiteness” could cover a multitude of sins (56). But Adah would not do that. Francis also insisted on giving the children to foster parents: “No African child lives with his parents. It is not convenient; it is not possible. There is no accommodation

for it. Moreover, they won't learn good English. They are much, much better off with an English woman" (57). The house owner and all the neighbours tormented them continuously to give the children to foster parents. But Adah would not do that. When Francis failed his summer examinations, he blamed Adah for making babysit her children. But it was his mistake of not attending the lectures and not studying enough. It took five attempts for him to pass the first part examination itself.

Then an arrangement was made to take care of the children. The children were left at Trudy's house which was a block away in a slum area. Trudy's children played with the toys of Adah's children whereas Titi and Vicky were made to play in the backyard which was filled with rubbish dump and dustbins. Trudy also did not clean them up. Adah complained of this to children's officer. But her arguments went in vain. Trudy lied a lot. She was reprimanded by the officer. Francis asked Titi to be a good child and told her to keep herself dry or he would beat her with the belt. Titi used to be a noisy child in Nigeria. But after coming to England, she became silent. Then Adah came to know that, Francis had threatened Titi to speak only in English otherwise he would beat her with belt. Adah had no other way rather than to continue to leave her children in Trudy's place. She was always afraid that something would happen to them. Vicky fell ill with meningitis. The doctor whom Adah and Francis had registered with could not come. So he sent his assistant who administered Vicky. He suggested them to go to hospital immediately. They were sent to Royal Free hospital. Adah became furious why they were sent to a free hospital:

“Why was the name of the hospital Royal Free? Was it a hospital for poor people, for second-class people? Why did they put the word “free” in it? Fear started to shroud her then. Were they sending her Vicky to a second-class hospital, a free one, just because they were blacks?” (73).

When Adah and Francis started to look for a better house, the White landlords rejected them because of their “Blackness”. Though they were ready to pay double the amount of the rent, they were rejected. Adah even mimicked the accent and spoke like an American woman. She did that to give the impression that they were Americans and not Blacks. They did this to be accepted into the English community. This shows that at which extent the Black people were marginalized.

“In any case, Francis and Adah had to look for another place to live. If it had been possible for them to find a new place, they would have been moved within weeks of her arrival in London. But it had not been. During the days and weeks that followed, she had asked people at work if they knew of anywhere. She would read and reread all that shop windows had to advertise. Nearly all the notices had ‘sorry, no coloureds’ on them. Her house hunting was made difficult because she was black...She was beginning to learn that her colour was something she was supposed to be ashamed of” (84-85).

The racial implication affected the people in a psychological way. They always felt inferior in front of the White people. Francis and other countrymen started to accept and believe in the inferior position that was imposed upon them. Mr. Noble’s case is another example of marginalization.

On one occasion, he was asked to remove his trousers, his mates wanted to see whether Africans had tails or not because that was the story they were told during the war. Adah remembered her father telling some of his friends something like that, but she had been too young to understand. When she heard of Mr. Noble’s case, she knew that such stories really were told. In any case, Mr. Noble removed his trousers for a pint of beer. It was then that he became so popular, popular and generous enough to be given the name



‘Noble’. He was such a noble man that he would do anything for his mates, even taking his trousers off (99).

Mr. Noble is one among the men who came to England in the late forties to read Law and failed to become successful. It was in Mr. Noble’s rental space that Adah and Francis got settled after a long search for an accommodation. Whenever they had problems Mr. Noble used to sort it out.

When Adah was in the hospital for the delivery of her child she was embarrassed by other women for not having a nightdress. She wore the hospital dress as she did not have a nightdress. Everyone in the ward was gossiping about her and even the visitors started to talk about her:

Look at that nigger woman with no flowers, no cards, no visitors, except her husband who usually comes five minutes before the closing time, looking as if he hates it all. Look at her, she doesn’t have a nightdress of her own. Is she from Holloway, from a prison? Only patients from prison wear hospital dresses in the ward.....She did not want to hear anymore. She did not want to think anymore. She closed her eyes, she dived into the sheets, covering herself up. The world would not see her now, the world would not know whether she had a hospital dress or her own dress. Had she not covered herself up, just like a dead person? (144).

Francis visited the hospital only a few times. He did not take care of her. Adah had to look after herself all alone amidst the embarrassing talks about her. He was a dangerous man to live with. She asked him to buy a nightdress for her. She was losing blood heavily. She actually needed two or three dresses. But she asked only one. Francis had bought the nightdress only from the salary of Adah which had arrived that month. The dress came two days later and she did not want to show off the dress as she had planned. She had learnt the lesson of keeping everything to herself.

Adah was struggling with bringing up five children at the same time. She stayed in the house and sent Francis to work. She had planned to write a book after being inspired by many writers that she had read in the library. She wrote *The Bride Price*, a semi autobiographical novel. It was in the form of a bound manuscript. She showed it to her friends in the Chalk Farm Library. She thought that everyone would encourage her for the first attempt. But her friend Bill took it seriously and read the whole manuscript. He said that she should give it to someone in publishing which Adah did not expect at all. She wanted to show it to Francis. When she asked Francis to read and give his opinion on it, he said: “You keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black. The white man can barely tolerate us men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breast-feed her baby” (203). Francis told it was rubbish and didn’t even read her script. When Adah was out of the house, Francis burnt her manuscript. There was a fight between them and she was injured by him. She came out of the house with the kids and was left with nothing. She took a house and stayed with her children. He came there and fought with her, broke the things in her house for filing divorce. While they went for divorce, Francis claimed that they had never been married. She could not produce the marriage certificate, passport and her children’s birth certificates. He had burnt them all. When the judge asked him to give maintenance for the children, he refused and told that he didn’t care if they were sent for adoption. Adah told that she would not let down the children until she was alive.

**Conclusion:**

Education plays a pivotal role in eradicating discrimination. Education gave Adah awareness and courage to fight against discrimination. The knowledge she received from her education gave her strength to handle all the mishaps in her life. It gave her the job of a librarian with huge salary through which she could run the family against all odds. Every time when she was at a difficult circumstance, her education saved her with decent first class

citizen jobs that gave her the feeling of being a first class citizen in an alien land where she was treated as a second class citizen. Whenever discrimination pulled her down, she came up with the support of education. Education is the right of every individual which could not be taken from them. From a young age, she was persistent to get education and it saved her throughout her life. Education gave her empowerment to fight against gender and racial discrimination. Francis also was an educated person, but he did not receive knowledge from education. Though an educated person, he was inherited with native Igbo patriarchal values. He believed and accepted himself as a second class citizen, whereas Adah did not accept that. Discrimination of a person in any form is not ethical. Right to freedom and equality must be followed practically rather than incorporating about it in textbooks alone.

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