

ENTANGLED WEB OF WOMEN'S RESILIENCE:
A STUDY OF *SECOND CLASS CITIZEN* BY BUCHI EMECHETA

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Abstract

Women are going through a lot of violence and sexual harassment all over the world. They suffer from low self-esteem as they go through sexual abuse, marital rape, rape, trafficking, modern slavery, female genital mutilation and other forms of wicked acts. The perpetrators of these inhuman acts are mostly the male folk who believe in subduing women and quieting them to show male chauvinism and jingoism which are still common all over the world. Patriarchal society thrives on this wickedness as women are regularly and constantly abused. Is it a sin to be a woman? Though government has set up different organizations to help fight violence against women and feminists have also lend their voices to help recognize girl child all over the world, yet a lot still happen secretly in different families and it seems that much has not been done to showcase this. This paper employed feminist theory in examining different forms of domestic violence against women, effects on victims and women's ability to recover from the torture and depression. Using Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, this work highlights different forms of girl child abuse, right from birth in order to condemn violence in all its ramifications, it shows the effects and of course encourage women to have self-confidence. This paper portrays that men of low esteem are caught in-between the web of fear and frustration which make them uncomfortable and therefore becoming violent to assert their positions in their families as the 'head' of the family whose decisions should not be challenged. This paper aims at encouraging women to be educated, strong willed and ready to fight for their right without being pushed. This study concludes that women should have self-confidence, self-assurance, firm trust and boldness to be able to make their own decisions wisely and to intelligently fight back domestic violence.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Resilience, Patriarchal society, Self-confidence, Depression

Introduction

Violence has to do with physical or mental abuse, forced pregnancy and forced marriage which prevent young girls from exploring and harassing their potentials. Violence and gender based social injustices strip women of their human rights and freedom. According to Abraham, (1998) Domestic violence is 'any form of coercion, power, and control –physical, sexual, verbal, mental or economic – perpetuated on a woman by her spouse, ex-spouse or extended kin, arising from the social relations that are created within the context of marriage.' (p.221) Women of all sorts, young and old, educated and illiterate, career women and house wives are intimidated, tortured and tormented daily in one way or the other. Many of them are raped, killed, kidnapped or trafficked. It is really unfortunate that women are not respected as they are physically weaker than men. Men subdue them and take advantage of them. In March 2021, World Health Organization estimated that 30% of women all over the world undergo a form of violence mainly from their spouse, intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. The article – 'Man arrested after serial rape of 40 in kano' by Odita Sunday, Bertram Nwannekamma and Yetunde Jeatogbe in the Thursday Guardian Newspaper of 11th June, 2020, on how a man in Dangora attacked an 80 – year – old woman and some children and how a 21-year-old man was sentenced to two years imprisonment for raping an eight-year-old girl shows that the punishment for such offence is not strong enough. This is because the man will be free in a short while and may continue with this useless and wicked act after two years. Such people are supposed to be subjected to stricter punishment.

The Thursday Guardian newspaper, 11th June 2020 is also of the view that the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) was formed in Nigeria ‘to discuss the establishment of a special court to try rapists with the Ministry of Justice’ according to their Director-General, Julie Okah-Donli (8). But it is not enough as the cases of rape and domestic violence increase daily. In fact, serious and more drastic measures should be introduced. It is obvious that a lot of people are not satisfied with the Nigerian government concerning the punishment given to rapists. This is one of the reasons why some organizations like the Young Women Christian Association according to same newspaper held a peaceful protest, subtly telling government and other important agencies to take cases of rape seriously and try to protect women’s interest. (8) Girls are getting more endangered and maximum punishment should be administered to perpetrators who in some cases kill their victims. It is clear that many factors which include early marriage, illiteracy, unemployment, jealousy, lower household income, unable to have a male child or bear children at all, negligence of house chores and exposure to violence during childhood are responsible for domestic violence. Women tolerate this inhuman act due to lack of exposure, low self-esteem, illiteracy, stigmatization and lack of source of income. The novel under study x-rays domestic violence due to jealousy and male chauvinism; it shows a woman being tortured by the husband because he wants to exercise authority and absolute control in his house. The idea of males trying to exercise their authority at home kills many women silently. Women are mostly not taken too serious to make their own decisions because some men believe that their major work in the family is to pro-create and do some domestic chores and failure to do that will definitely result to beating and violence. Violence has some negative effects on the emotional, physical and psyche of the women and that is why this paper uses feminist theory to access the causes, extent of harm done and the efforts women are making to break away from the shackles of subjugation.

Of course, *Second Class Citizen* by Buchi Emecheta has been reviewed by some critics. Abioseh Michael Porter looks at the text from the structure angle. He is of the opinion that the structure of the novel is ‘inadequate’ and so ‘loses some of its strength’. (128) He goes ahead to explain that other characters apart from Adah and Francis are not portrayed in full perspective. Such characters include Mr Bill and Mr Okpara. Burcin writes that for Adah, London is a land of freedom and self realization. Of the opinion that the novel is partly autobiographic where she achieved her desired goals.

Omer Ogunc is of the view that Ada suffers from patriarchal and colonial discourses. Adah, according to Omer is presented as the ultimate form of the othering process that results from the ‘colonial discourse’ because she is a ‘black immigrant in Britain’ (45) He argues that Emecheta highlights the experiences of black women immigrants through this novel using English language and British literary style but garnished the story with qualities of oral literature. (45)

Djaha N’de Tano sees identity negotiation as an opportunity for the two identity groups in the text, *Second Class Citizen* (men and women) to be involved in struggle that helps them both ‘to see the ‘human face’ beyond the broad stereotypic group membership identity labels.’ (475) His work encourages women to fight for their rights in womanist way and not through rigorous feminist way. According to him, Buchi changes women’s standard from being second class citizens.

Odinye Ifeoma in her article concludes that women can be independent if given the opportunity. She goes ahead to show how women shun stereotype role through feminist protest. (52)

This work is quite different from the above works as this study concludes that women’s destiny is in their hands and so should not wait for anybody to give them any opportunity to become what they want to become. They should always be ready to ‘take the bull by the horn’ just like Adah who did not wait for Francis to approve most of her moves.

Feminist Theory

The concept of feminism may be difficult to analyse because according to Dobbie, (2012) the meaning of feminism differ in different places. She affirms ‘... it’s several shapes and directions vary from one country to another, even from one critic to another. The premise that unites those who call themselves feminist critics is the assumption that Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal, creating an

imbalance of power that marginalizes women and their work.’ (102) Dobie is of the opinion that Western culture regard women as inferior creatures for a long time that great thinkers like Aristotle and Charles Darwin degrade women in their writings. Alexander Pope writes that ‘Most women have no character at all.’ (103) Dobie goes further to remark that women like Mary Wollstonecraft started voicing out in the late eighteenth century and in 1792 she published *A Vindication of the Right of Women* where she showed women as oppressed group of people. She called on women to be educated so as to be the companions of men (104) and she encouraged women to be self-confident. She also writes that in 1929, Virginia Woolf published *A Room of One’s Own* questioning why women should seldom appear in history while Elaine Showalter divided feminism into three stages: (1840-80) when women were being careful with their write ups, they tried to imitate literary tradition already established by men, (1880 - 1920) women protested against their lack of rights (105) and (1920 - present) women started exploring female experience in art and literature (105).

African feminists include Molaria Ogundipe, Obioma Nnaemeka, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Bessie Head, Chimamada Ngozi Adichie, Zaynab Alkali and a host of others. They all write to expose wickedness towards women and to liberate women from the heterogeneous cultures of Africa that relegate women to the background and make them less productive in the society. Buchi Emecheta said that she is a feminist with a small ‘f’. Nfah-Abbenyi (1977) writes that Buchi believes in women getting married and settling down to blissful marriage, ‘...But if it doesn’t work, for goodness sake, call it off.’ (7) This is exactly what Emecheta (1977) expressed in *Second Class Citizen* where Adah walked out of her marriage instead of being killed by her husband who always feels inferior before Adah just because Adah is well educated, has self-confidence and refused to be pulled down by him.

Resilience in *Second Class Citizen*

Adah encountered so many obstacles in her marital home because Francis was not brought up in a positive atmosphere, he never valued people’s success, and he is very selfish. He had never respected Adah probably because Adah is an ordinary woman therefore a nonentity whose importance and opinion never mattered. Francis hates self-improvement not to talk of a female progressing and improving herself. Positive mind and positivity helped Adah a lot by making her feel that she is worth more than Francis was trying to portray. With this, Adah feels in charge of her destiny and future and with determination, she strives to succeed and live for her children. The things that carry Adah along are the love for her unique children, being a mother, her challenging career, being important to her children because her children feel pain whenever she is not happy and being a writer. Being able to write a novel ‘Bride Price’ which was valued and cherished by her co-workers makes her so happy and fulfilled. Adah’s marriage lacks communication especially when she realized that Francis is not her friend. Adah had been self-confident right from childhood, it enabled her to set her goals – being educated, not to marry an old man, travelling abroad and being a writer. Self-confidence is an asset which every female should endeavour to possess. Adah succeeds in life because she is self-confident and believes in herself, her abilities and her judgment. She is pushed to the wall by her husband for her to gain self-confidence. She is such an intelligent girl that she tries to control her thoughts and emotions when she realizes that she cannot influence Francis.

Adah at eight years had not started school because she is a girl but her younger brother, Boy started school years before Adah in a very expensive school, Ladi-Lak Institute Lagos just because he is a boy. Adah’s education is supposed to end in the kitchen because even if she starts school, she won’t last in school as she would only be allowed to learn how to ‘write her name and count’. And of course one or two years in school will set her on the right track and she will definitely learn how to sew like her mother’ (Emecheta, 9). Of course this was the dream of every parent for their girl child those days. But at nine years of age before Pa’s death, Adah sneaked out of the house and went to school, Methodist school around their house without anybody’s consent with Pa’s shaving slate and an oversize dress because she loved education. She slipped out of the house while Ma was busy with a visitor in their house. Adah sneaking out of the house to attend school without Ma knowing about it sends Ma to police station as women are described thus:

She was a great talker, very careless, otherwise Adah would not have been able to slip away as she had. Women were like that. They sat in the house, ate, gossiped and slept. They would not even look after their children properly. (Emecheta, 13)

The above is the picture of women in those days and that is why men classify women as ‘unserious’ but this is the opposite of Adah as she is strong, smart, focused, determined and resilient. She started suffering early in life as soon as she lost her father at the age of nine and the brother, Boy partake in the suffering as well as he resides with one of their father’s cousin and their mother (Ma) gets married to Pa’s brother. Adah becomes a servant that wakes up by 4:30am every morning to do the chores in the house but this did not deter her from her plans of attending school. She wakes up very early for her to meet up. Adah’s uncle and Ma do not want her to go to school but Adah continued school after the father’s death so that her dowry will be big enough to take care of Boy’s education, the hundred or two hundred pounds Adah’s father left was also kept for Boy’s education. Adah being determined to go further in education stole her uncle’s money to pay for her Common Entrance Examination. This singular act earned her one hundred and three ‘koboko’ strokes. She becomes optimistic to succeed in life and promised herself to get to the target she sets for herself. She went to secondary school on scholarship and later married a young man, Francis. Adah’s determination and resilience show up again as she vowed to herself after receiving Barr Nweze from United Kingdom at Ibusa (her home town) that she must go to UK to study. During Adah’s adolescent stage when children usually become self-conscious there was nobody to direct and guide her but thank God she is a smart lass and was able to learn from her peers. This is the stage when children need many useful lessons of life and survival. They need instruction, direction and fellowship with their elders and peers to balance their understanding. Adah missed all this as she is an ordinary girl who is supposed to be married off early in life. Her family neglects her and so she has nobody to direct her, but in the midst of all these, she remains confident and focused. Adah faces so many emotional challenges right from her childhood, associated with negligence by her mother, foster parents, in-laws and her husband.

Adah’s uncle has a wife, four big sons, one daughter-in-law, a granddaughter and Adah all in one room. This system did not deter Adah from her dreams. Adah was being forced to marry elderly men old enough to be her father at age eleven to help Ma because they will pay bigger bride price than young men that just started work. Adah refused, Emecheta puts it this way:

She would never, never in her life get married to any man, Rich or poor, to whom she would have to serve his food on bended knee: she would have to treat as a master and refer to as ‘Sir’ even behind his back. (Emecheta, 20)

Adah gets married to Francis, a young man and her people are not happy with her as Francis cannot pay the five hundred pounds bride price because Adah was a damsel (as a secondary school leaver). Francis did not pay any bride price because he is poor but they live together after their pitiable wedding. Adah and Francis forgot to buy wedding rings so the man refused to wed them and were wedded the next day when they finally bought the rings. They came to the wedding in a bus and Adah was wearing ordinary dress not white. This shows how poor Francis is and to crown it all, Adah’s first salary as a Librarian in American Consulate Library in Lagos was sixty pounds and she becomes the breadwinner and takes care of Francis, pay their rent, help in paying the school fees of Francis seven sisters and she later sent Francis to UK.

She is disappointed when she finally arrives London and finds out that Francis lives in one small room without bathroom and kitchen and with the toilet outside in a very long house that looks endless. The room is so small to accommodate one person and their bed is a single bed. She is disappointed but never complained as she is determined to succeed. The Obis live like animals; their room is so small and uncomfortable. Adah squeezes in on the settee with her babies. But even with this, she is determined to live with her children instead of giving them out to foster mothers. Her landlord, landlady, neighbours and even Francis are not happy with her decision because every black parent gives out her babies. When at a time taking care of their children becomes a serious problem as her husband, Francis who was doing that refused to continue asking her ‘who is going to look after your children for you? ...I can’t go on doing it; you will have to look for someone. I can’t go on looking

after your children for you' (49). As if the children are not his too. Adah quickly arranged a place to keep her children while she goes to work.

She is actually resilient and eager to succeed against all odds. She feels the challenge in her office as some of her co-workers made her feel inferior but it does not stop her. As if all these are not enough, Adah and her husband got quit notice to pack out from their one room apartment in Ashdown Street within a month. Of course and Francis has no money, to worsen it, Blacks and coloured people are regarded as second class citizens. Adah finds it extremely difficult in London as blacks who are looked as inferior and second class citizens are expected to live in ghetto. All the vacant places in decent areas read 'sorry, no coloureds' (76). Coupled with Francis behavior, Adah has psychological problem that at a time she started to doubt her senses - She would laugh loudly at nothing, just to show her neighbours how happy she was. This did not stop her from achieving her aims rather she decides to be equivalent to the whites. Emecheta writes:

The result was that she started to act in the way expected of her
Because she was still new in England, but after a while, she was
not going to accept it from anyone. She was going to regard herself
as the equal of any white. (Emecheta,77)

Adah is so humble that she accepts her role as defined by her husband not to go to Mrs Noble's place as she may be a bad influence on her, he also instructs her not to have friends. To Francis, Adah should be seen and not heard, Francis speaks on her behalf. Francis wants Adah to always look up to him as his Lord, he prefers Adah being passive, depending on him, has no status and must always obey him without questions. To Francis, women should be silent observers with subordinate roles. They should carry out their roles without questioning. To him Adah must be shaped to meet up his requirements of wife material and womanhood.

Adah has three children in a space of four years and she decides to go for family planning few weeks after her third child to secure her sanity, Francis never accepted the idea but Adah forged his signature to do it. Francis beat Adah mercilessly when he discovers what happened. To him, it is only done by harlots and single girls who sleep around. Francis looks down on Adah's depression and anxiety because he underestimates how severe, serious and incapacitated these conditions can be and her mental health deteriorated due to environmental factors caused by extreme family stress variables.

To Francis, a woman was a second class human to be slept with at any time and if she refuses she will be beaten up until she gives in. He orders Adah around and beats her up to make sure she washes his cloths and gets his meals ready at the right time. To him there is no need to have an intelligent conversation with his wife because she might start getting ideas. Adah becomes a thorn on Francis flesh because she is not and will never be the type of wife described above. At a time Adah gets tough over Francis beatings and starts fighting him back, even beating him. Emecheta writes:

She had been through the worst. Even his beating and slapping did not move her anymore, she did not know where she got her courage from, but she was beginning to hit him back even biting him when need be. Francis threatened to break all her teeth for her and grew his nails as long as those of a tiger, as whenever Adah opened her mouth to bite, Francis would dig his tiger nails into her flesh, almost choking her...she still hit back occasionally when she knew she was near the door or out of danger (168)

Buchi describes Francis as a wicked child who enjoys torturing his animal given to him as a pet. Adah and her husband fight all the time that their landlord, Mr Noble starts getting sick and tired of them, asks them to pack out of his house. Adah's husband exposes their children to violence which according to World Health Organization (WHO) will have adverse effect on their kids. WHO believes that such children become violent later in life and may have behavioural, emotional and mental health issues in the future. WHO also supports good secondary education for females and empowering women.

Francis' attitude which is to intimidate his partner, violence and sexual abuse on his wife never changed Adah's resilience as she 'had always dreamed of becoming a writer' (182) and so with her exposure as

a librarian in three different libraries, she writes a story titled 'Bride Price' without Francis knowing about it.(180) When Francis knows about it, he tries discouraging her saying:

You keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black. The white man can barely tolerate its men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breast feed her baby (Emecheta, 184)

Francis refuses to read Adah's work as he calls it 'rubbish'. (184) Adah's spirit is killed, and it dawned on her that Francis can never tolerate an intelligent woman (p.187). To show Francis determination to bring her down, he burnt Adah's manuscript to kill her zeal. Adah is baffled that Francis hates her so much to burn her brainchild. This is the last straw that broke the camel's back and to suck Adah to death, Francis quits his job again to stay in the house for Adah to feed him but Adah never did that instead she hired a two-room flat and moves in with her kids.

Francis swears never to visit her and 'her brats' (p.188). Adah was highly disappointed because she tries to find self-fulfillment in wifhood and motherhood as the society prescribes but when this did not work out, she left her matrimonial home with her children. Adah's positive attitude towards herself results in high self-esteem. Her positive thinking and attitude help her change the fixed negative attitudes she had about herself and other women as a child. These negative thinking and attitudes actually deter women mostly from improving themselves as humans and progressing in other areas. Such negative thinking guarantees that women do not attain self-actualization while positive thinking makes them become self-sufficient and achieve our potentials. These Adah did very well by remaining focused irrespective of the distractions from her mother, foster parents and Francis, her husband.

Four weeks after Adah packed out of Francis house with her children, Francis visits Adah to urge her to continue with the marriage as he does not believe in separation or divorce. Adah telling him that he does not perform his duty as a responsible man – never paid rent, school fees, nor bought clothes for the kids earned Adah a strong beating that he would have stabbed her, he destroys Adah's properties. Adah 'had been so bruised and maltreated that she could not see herself going to work for a week or two'. (p.190). She decides that the law must step in. Adah went to court. She sues Francis for her safety and the protection of her kids. Francis is charged for assault and Adah knowing the consequence decides to lie in the court that the bruises were caused by falls and Francis broke her transistor radio because he thought it was a chair. Francis said that he is not married to Adah and challenged Adah to produce their marriage certificate. It dawned on Adah that she could not, and could not even produce her passport and the children's birth certificates – Francis had burnt all of them and there in the court, Francis told Adah that 'she (Adah) and the kids ceased to exist' as far as he is concerned. (191) This shows how heartless Francis is. It is understood that he never loved Adah, probably, he marries Adah because of Adah's career. Francis never thinks that distinct love and expressing it physically, emotionally and spiritually increases one's life span and general well being.

Francis denies Adah and the children in the court saying that he does not 'mind their being sent for adoption' (p.191) instead of contributing to their welfare. Adah remains strong and firm with her decision to take care of their children. Showing how determined and resilience Adah is she told Francis not to worry that 'The children are mine and that is enough. I shall never let them down as long as I live'. (191)

With this Adah left crying but determined to work hard and carry out her vow – responsibilities as a concerned mother because of the love and affection she has for her children. Corinthians 13:7 says, "Love never gives up, never loses faith and is always hopeful" and so it is the love Adah had for her kids and work that keeps her going, that gives her the zeal to fight Francis in the court and makes her feel she can survive without Francis. Adah's action in the court is an act of bravery which saved her life and that of her children. Life is precarious and couples are supposed to help each other romantically and sexually in coping with the stress of living, but Francis never did this rather he is bent on intimidating his wife.

Adah's savour from Francis's wicked chains is her ability to acquire education, and this gave her hope for a more impressive future. This is because when a woman is resourceful, self-reliant, financially independent from the man, she can then exercise the right to choose what she wants and that is why Achufusi (1994) writes that Filomina Steady gave the definition of true feminism as. '...an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant' (p.160).

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta is one of those female writers that fight for gender liberation through her literary works. Adah lives in perpetual fear, psychological trauma and depression with Francis right from Nigeria when Francis was controlled by his parents and siblings to London when he started beating her and regarding her as ordinary furniture or object in the house and child making industry. Francis's behaviour (burning Adah's manuscripts) explains why Adah should be reluctant to continue writing. Of course Buchi never told us whether she continued or not but this is a very big negative blow to her talent.

In fact, as Adah gets better jobs and succeeds in her Library examinations, Francis becomes scared and feels more threatened and devised more wicked means to suppress her, so as to retain his position in the home as 'man' of the house. Adah suffered in her effort to defend herself from Francis's violence and abuse. To fight Francis back, Adah turned violent which she did to defend herself. Characters like Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* turned to a silent killer in order to defend and free herself from her wicked husband. Firdaus in El Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* also turned murderous just to defend herself.

She finally travels to UK and faces her marital challenges boldly. Being confident of herself and determined to survive, she bolted out of her marriage but not without dealing with Francis, for she walked out of the marriage with her shoulders high and is optimistic that she can make it without Francis who is actually a thorn on her flesh. It is seen that there is no alternative to being self-reliant and investing in people. Adah invested in herself and gained the world at last. It is in Adah's character to remain focused and determined because she knows what she wants. Of course, Adah notices that there is no alternative to being self-reliant and investing in herself. The most important thing a woman fears is her confidence and the most important thing a woman needs is being focused.

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