

Subaltern Feminism in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second-Class Citizen*: A Study of Gender, Voice, and Resistance

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Abstract—Buchi Emecheta, one of the most powerful voices in African literature, is known for her honest portrayal of women's lives in colonial and postcolonial societies. Her novels reflect the experiences of women who are silenced by both patriarchal traditions and colonial oppression. This research focuses on two of her most celebrated works, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second-Class Citizen*, to examine how Emecheta's fiction represents the struggles, endurance, and gradual empowerment of subaltern women. In *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta's protagonist Adah Okafor fights against gender and racial discrimination while trying to build a life in England. Her journey from Nigeria to London symbolizes the larger struggle of African women seeking identity and self-worth in a world that constantly marginalizes them. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's devotion to her children and family exposes the irony of traditional motherhood, showing how cultural expectations often trap women in endless cycles of sacrifice and pain. The study applies Subaltern Theory (Gayatri Spivak) and African Feminism (Molara Ogundipe and Chikwenye Ogunyemi) to explore how Emecheta's female characters rise from silence to self-awareness. It argues that Emecheta creates a unique form of African subaltern feminism that values the lived experiences, struggles, and moral strength of women rather than abstract Western ideals. Her works give a powerful voice to those long ignored, turning silence into strength and suffering into self-realization.

Index Terms—Buchi Emecheta, Subaltern Feminism, African Feminism, Postcolonial Literature, Gender and Resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Buchi Emecheta occupies a significant place in African and postcolonial literature as a writer who gave voice to the silenced experiences of African

women. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1944, and later settling in London, Emecheta drew deeply from her own life to portray the double marginalization faced by African women under both patriarchy and colonialism. Her fiction, marked by realism and emotional honesty, explores the conflicts between tradition and modernity, between the desire for self-fulfillment and the social expectations imposed upon women. Emecheta's works such as *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and *Second-Class Citizen* (1974) have become landmarks in feminist and postcolonial discourse for their vivid portrayal of women's resilience, endurance, and search for identity in oppressive social systems.

In the postcolonial African context, women's voices often remained unheard within both colonial narratives and native patriarchal structures. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?", becomes particularly relevant in understanding the condition of Emecheta's female characters, who are subalterns not only because of their gender but also because of their race and class. Emecheta's writing emerges as a response to this silence, a literary act of reclaiming speech for women historically denied agency. Her protagonists Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* and Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* symbolize two dimensions of subaltern existence: the immigrant woman struggling against racial and gender bias, and the traditional mother bound by cultural expectations. Both characters navigate their worlds with courage, reflecting Emecheta's conviction that "women have to fight for themselves."

Through these narratives, Emecheta articulates what may be termed African subaltern feminism a feminist

perspective grounded in indigenous realities rather than Western liberal ideals. Unlike Western feminism, which often centers on individual autonomy, Emecheta's feminism arises from community, motherhood, and shared suffering. Her works challenge the colonial stereotypes of the "African woman" as passive or primitive and instead present her as intelligent, enduring, and capable of moral strength. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, for instance, Nnu Ego's life represents the contradictions between cultural ideals of motherhood and the personal suffering it entails. Similarly, in *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah's determination to educate herself and raise her children with dignity reflects the broader struggle of African women against both domestic patriarchy and Western racism. These stories, while deeply personal, embody the collective experience of women who seek liberation within restrictive cultural frameworks.

Thus, Emecheta's fiction stands at the intersection of gender, culture, and postcolonial identity. Her narrative voice does not merely depict oppression but transforms it into a form of resistance. By portraying women's everyday struggles as acts of endurance and defiance, Emecheta gives meaning to the concept of subaltern feminism that speaks from below, grounded in lived experiences rather than theoretical constructs. The present study, therefore, seeks to explore how *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second-Class Citizen* embody this form of feminist resistance, revealing Emecheta's enduring contribution to African and global feminist thought.

II. THE SUBALTERN WOMAN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR VOICE

In the literary vision of Buchi Emecheta, the African woman emerges as a figure of endurance, resilience, and suppressed strength a subaltern struggling to find her voice in the face of patriarchy, colonialism, and social inequality. Emecheta's fiction embodies the experiences of women who have historically been silenced both by traditional African society and by colonial systems that reinforced gender and racial hierarchies. Her narratives reflect what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously questioned in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* whether those at the margins of power can truly represent themselves in a world that continually defines them through the gaze of others. Emecheta's novels, particularly *Second-Class Citizen*

and *The Joys of Motherhood*, attempt to answer this question through the lived realities of women who speak not through rhetoric or rebellion but through survival, self-belief, and inner strength. Her women do not possess the privilege of speech in the political or public sense; instead, they "speak" through the act of enduring oppression and refusing to let it destroy their humanity.

In *Second-Class Citizen*, the protagonist Adah Okafor represents this silent yet powerful journey of a woman's assertion of self. As a Nigerian woman living in postcolonial London, Adah is caught between two worlds her native culture, which expects obedience and submission from women, and the colonial metropolis, which sees her as inferior because of her race and class. Her husband Francis becomes an agent of patriarchal control, constantly reminding her that a woman's place is in the home. Despite this, Adah dreams of independence and education; she struggles to carve out a life of dignity for herself and her children. Her journey from a dependent wife to a self-sufficient woman mirrors the awakening of the subaltern voice within an oppressive social order. Emecheta uses Adah's experience to challenge both the African patriarchal structure and the racism of Western society. She exposes how women like Adah occupy a "double colonized" position oppressed by their own culture and marginalized within foreign systems. Yet, Adah's persistence, her refusal to give up her sense of self, becomes an act of rebellion against both. Through her character, Emecheta demonstrates that the subaltern woman may not always shout or revolt, but she resists by surviving, working, and educating herself in a world that continuously seeks to silence her.

Emecheta's portrayal of women's silence is never a sign of weakness; it is a language of endurance, an alternative form of expression in societies that deny women the right to speak. Her female characters challenge the notion that voicelessness is equivalent to passivity. For Emecheta, survival itself is a political statement. By enduring and continuing to live on their own terms, women like Adah reclaim their agency from systems that would erase them. This subtle yet profound defiance reflects what can be termed as African subaltern feminism a form of feminist expression rooted in cultural and communal realities rather than Western notions of protest and individuality. Emecheta's voice becomes a bridge

between silence and speech, between submission and resistance. She allows the reader to hear the muted but persistent voices of women who, though socially invisible, shape the moral and emotional fabric of their communities. Through her fiction, Emecheta proves that the subaltern woman can indeed speak not always through words, but through the strength of her spirit, the endurance of her struggle, and the quiet assertion of her existence against forces determined to keep her silent.

III. MOTHERHOOD, CULTURE, AND THE IRONY OF SACRIFICE

In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, motherhood becomes both a sacred duty and a cruel burden, exposing the deep contradictions of gender roles within traditional African society. The novel's protagonist, Nnu Ego, embodies the idealized image of the African mother devoted, nurturing, and self-sacrificing. Yet, through her life story, Emecheta dismantles the cultural glorification of motherhood and reveals its hidden pain and irony. Within the Igbo society portrayed in the novel, a woman's worth is defined almost entirely by her ability to bear and raise children, especially sons. Nnu Ego's happiness depends on her fertility; her first child's death fills her with shame, as if she has failed her only purpose in life. In this cultural framework, motherhood is not merely a personal experience but a social obligation a way for women to earn respect and identity. However, Emecheta turns this expectation into a site of feminist critique. She shows that while motherhood is celebrated as the pinnacle of womanhood, it is also the mechanism through which women are controlled, confined, and denied individuality. Nnu Ego's life, filled with endless labour, sacrifice, and emotional suffering, becomes a commentary on how patriarchal societies manipulate maternal ideals to sustain women's subservience.

The irony of Nnu Ego's motherhood lies in the contrast between cultural ideals and her lived reality. The title *The Joys of Motherhood* itself is bitterly ironic, as the narrative reveals far more suffering than joy. Nnu Ego dedicates her entire life to nurturing her children, working tirelessly to provide them with food, education, and comfort. Yet, in her old age, she finds herself alone and forgotten by the very children for whom she sacrificed everything. Her sons, once the

source of her pride and purpose, move away in pursuit of their own ambitions, embodying the generational shift brought by urbanization and colonial modernity. Through this tragic outcome, Emecheta exposes the emptiness of the traditional ideal that glorifies women's self-sacrifice as moral virtue. Nnu Ego's fate reflects the emotional cost of a culture that praises motherhood but denies mothers recognition as independent human beings. Emecheta thus portrays motherhood not as a natural, joyful destiny but as a socially constructed burden that traps women in cycles of labor and emotional dependency. Her feminist realism dismantles the romanticized notion of motherhood and replaces it with a truthful, painful depiction of its contradictions how love becomes duty, and how devotion becomes erasure.

Despite the tragedy of Nnu Ego's story, Emecheta's treatment of motherhood is not entirely pessimistic. Rather, it reveals the strength and moral depth of women who continue to endure despite systemic injustice. In Emecheta's vision, motherhood becomes a paradoxical form of resistance even when it confines, it also gives meaning to women's existence. Nnu Ego's sacrifices, though unacknowledged, represent a quiet rebellion against despair and defeat. Her nurturing spirit and perseverance affirm the value of women's emotional and physical labor in sustaining families and communities. This duality where motherhood is both bondage and empowerment define Emecheta's feminist stance. She does not reject motherhood outright; instead, she seeks to redefine it in ways that allow women dignity, recognition, and selfhood. Through Nnu Ego's suffering, Emecheta urges for a new understanding of maternal identity one that frees it from the chains of obligation and acknowledges it as a shared social responsibility rather than a woman's solitary burden. In this way, *The Joys of Motherhood* stands as one of the most powerful feminist texts in African literature, turning the cultural symbol of motherhood into a site of irony, critique, and transformation.

IV. TOWARD AN AFRICAN SUBALTERN FEMINISM

Buchi Emecheta's fiction, particularly *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second-Class Citizen*, lays the groundwork for an authentic African subaltern feminism one that emerges not from Western feminist

ideology but from the lived experiences, struggles, and cultural realities of African women. Unlike Western feminism, which often emphasizes individual liberation and gender equality in isolation, Emecheta's feminism is deeply rooted in the collective identity of African womanhood, community survival, and socio-economic struggle. Her female characters are not merely victims of patriarchy; they are survivors navigating complex intersections of tradition, colonialism, and class. Through their journeys, Emecheta constructs a feminism that speaks in the voice of the subaltern the unheard, marginalized woman who fights not only against male domination but also against the historical and cultural hierarchies imposed by colonial power structures. In this sense, Emecheta's feminism is not an imported ideology but an organic, contextualized response to the realities of African womanhood, one that bridges the gap between gender and colonial subjugation.

In *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta portrays Adah Obi's struggle in postcolonial Britain as a continuation of subaltern oppression this time under racial and economic hierarchies that relegate her to invisibility. As a Nigerian immigrant woman, Adah faces a double colonization: first by patriarchy and second by imperialism. Her husband, Francis, mirrors the patriarchal authority she thought she had left behind, using tradition as a weapon to suppress her ambitions. Yet, Adah's resilience and determination to assert her agency reflect Emecheta's vision of an evolving African feminism one that resists both Western condescension and indigenous patriarchy. Through Adah, Emecheta argues that African women must find their voice within their own cultural framework, redefining empowerment through economic independence, education, and self-respect. The diasporic setting of *Second-Class Citizen* also expands the scope of African feminism by linking it to issues of migration, racism, and identity, showing how the subaltern woman's silence extends beyond geographical boundaries. Emecheta thus reframes feminism as a movement of transformation grounded in lived struggle rather than theoretical abstraction.

Toward the end of her works, Emecheta envisions an African subaltern feminism that values dignity, resilience, and self-definition over rebellion for its own sake. Her female protagonists, though often crushed by societal expectations, embody a quiet yet powerful form of resistance. They reject victimhood

and instead transform suffering into moral strength and autonomy. This feminism acknowledges the deep connection between motherhood, culture, and identity while challenging the oppressive structures that distort these relationships. It advocates for reform rather than rejection for reclaiming traditional values of care and community while dismantling the gender hierarchies that have corrupted them. Emecheta's subaltern feminism is thus both radical and restorative: it seeks justice without alienating culture, and liberation without erasing belonging. As she writes from the margins of both Africa and the diaspora, Emecheta gives voice to women who exist at the intersection of multiple silences. Her fiction, therefore, becomes a manifesto for an African feminism that is rooted in history, attuned to culture, and open to change a feminism of survival, adaptation, and enduring strength. In charting this path, Emecheta not only redefines the feminist discourse in African literature but also restores agency and humanity to the subaltern woman, whose story had long been told by others.

V. CONCLUSION

Buchi Emecheta's fiction stands as a powerful articulation of African subaltern feminism, where the struggles of women like Adah and Nnu Ego transcend the boundaries of gender to expose the deeper wounds of colonialism, patriarchy, and poverty. Her narratives illuminate how African women, long silenced by both indigenous traditions and Western hierarchies, reclaim their identities through endurance, education, and moral strength. Rather than rejecting their culture, Emecheta's women redefine it from within, asserting a feminism that is culturally rooted yet progressive. Her literary vision creates a bridge between survival and self-realization, transforming silence into speech and oppression into agency. In doing so, Emecheta not only rewrites the African woman's story but also expands the meaning of feminism itself making it an inclusive, contextually grounded, and deeply human movement toward freedom and dignity.

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