



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

The Legacy and Influence of Buchi Emecheta on African and Feminist Literature

Mr. Snehashish Sarkar

Department of English; Faculty Arts and Humanities, Kalinga University, Raipur

ABSTRACT: -

Buchi Emecheta, as one of the Africa's most influential and popular literary voices, has left an indelible mark on African and feminist literature through her powerful narratives that explore themes of gender roles, identity, colonialism, and societal expectations. Her works, such as *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Second-Class Citizen*, and *The Bride Price*, provide a poignant critique of patriarchal structures, illuminating the struggles of African women who navigate the intersection of tradition and modernity. As a Nigerian-born writer, Emecheta's personal experiences of migration, marginalization, and resistance deeply inform her literary works, making them compelling reflections of both historical and contemporary issues. Emecheta's contributions to African literature are significant in their ability to challenge the traditional portrayals of women in African society. Her female protagonists, often trapped within oppressive socio-cultural norms, resist and redefine their roles, asserting their agency despite systemic obstacles. This nuanced portrayal of African womanhood broadens the discourse on feminism by integrating indigenous perspectives with global feminist movements. Unlike Western feminism, which often emphasizes individual liberation, Emecheta's feminism acknowledges the communal realities of African societies, where familial and societal expectations shape personal identity. Colonialism and its lingering impact on African identity form another critical aspect of Emecheta's literary discourse. Her works illustrate how colonial legacies continue to influence social structures, economic opportunities, and cultural identity, particularly for African women. By foregrounding the lived experiences of African women under both colonial and post-colonial conditions, Emecheta challenges the dominant Eurocentric narratives and asserts the importance of indigenous storytelling in shaping historical consciousness. Moreover, Emecheta's influence extends beyond her literary contributions. As one of the first African female writers to gain international recognition, she paved the way for subsequent generations of African women writers, including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, and Lola Shoneyin. Her work continues to inspire contemporary discussions on gender, migration, and the politics of storytelling in African literature.

In conclusion, Buchi Emecheta's legacy is a testament to the power of literature in shaping cultural discourse and challenging societal norms. Her exploration of gender roles, colonialism, and identity provides a vital foundation for understanding African feminist literature. As readers and scholars continue to engage with her works, her influence remains an enduring force in literary and feminist scholarship, reaffirming the importance of African women's voices in global literary spaces.

Keywords: - Colonialism, Migration, Marginalization, Western feminism, Socio-cultural norms

Introduction: -

Emecheta is often described as a feminist writer, though she herself rejected radical feminism, preferring to identify as a writer concerned with the conditions of women. Her novels challenge patriarchal norms that restrict women's independence while also portraying the complexities of motherhood, marriage, and societal expectations. Unlike many Western feminist texts that focus on individual liberation, Emecheta's feminism is deeply rooted in the African context, where family, tradition, and communal values are central to identity. *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta presents the paradox of motherhood within African society. The protagonist, Nnu Ego, devotes her life to fulfilling traditional expectations of bearing and raising children, believing that motherhood guarantees status and security. However, as she endures suffering, poverty, and emotional neglect, Emecheta exposes the contradictions in a system that idealizes motherhood while disregarding the personal well-being of women. The novel ultimately critiques the romanticized notion of self-sacrificial motherhood, presenting it as a tool of oppression rather than fulfilment. *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta explores the immigrant experience, focusing on Adah, a Nigerian woman who migrates to Britain in search of a better life. Through Adah's struggles with racism, sexism, and domestic abuse, the novel highlights the double marginalization faced by African women in foreign lands. The story reflects Emecheta's own life experiences, adding authenticity to its themes of resilience and determination. Emecheta's feminist outlook extends to *The Bride Price*, which critiques forced marriages and the commodification of women. The novel tells the story of Aku-nna, a young girl whose fate is determined by the traditional practice of bride price—a system that treats women as economic assets. By challenging these norms, Emecheta gives voice to women who suffer under patriarchal customs, advocating for agency and self-determination. Emecheta's works are deeply intertwined with postcolonial themes, particularly the ways in which colonial rule reshaped African identities.

While polygamy was not a perfect marital arrangement, it was well-suited to the agrarian lifestyle of the Ibo people and contained several built-in mechanisms that allowed women to better cope with the burdens of that type of lifestyle. (Derrickson)

The impact of Western education, religion, and economic structures on African traditions is a recurring theme in her novels. She critiques the lingering effects of colonialism, demonstrating how it exacerbates gender inequality and disrupts traditional family structures. “The Slave Girl depicts the economic value of women as analogues to chattels of trade and property for sale” (Onuigbo, p. 98). In *The Slave Girl*, Emecheta presents the life of Ojebeta, a girl sold into slavery in colonial Nigeria. The novel depicts the intersection of indigenous and colonial systems of oppression, revealing how both traditional and colonial structures subjugate women. While Ojebeta ultimately gains freedom, her experiences symbolize the broader struggles of African nations grappling with the dual burdens of indigenous customs and colonial exploitation.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta further explores the tension between indigenous African values and colonial influences. Nnu Ego’s experiences reflect the changing roles of women in a society caught between tradition and modernity. “In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta presents the conspiracy against womanhood. Women are saddled with the responsibility of taking care of their children even when their husbands are around” (Onuigbo, p. 99). As colonialism brings new economic and social pressures, traditional gender roles become even more restrictive, leaving women vulnerable to both cultural and foreign exploitation. Emecheta also critiques the Eurocentric perspective that defines African identities through a colonial lens. Her works resist the idea that Westernization is synonymous with progress, emphasizing that African women must define their identities on their own terms rather than through imposed ideologies. One of Emecheta’s most significant contributions to African literature is her redefinition of womanhood. While earlier African literature often depicted women in passive or secondary roles, Emecheta’s protagonists are complex, multi-dimensional, and active agents in their destinies. Even in the face of oppression, her female characters seek self-improvement, education, and autonomy. In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah defies societal expectations by pursuing education and financial independence, despite her husband’s efforts to control her.

Francis sees a woman as a second human, to be slept with at any time, even during the day, and if Ada refuses, he would beaten sense into her until she gives in; to be ordered out of bed after he is done with her; to make sure she washes his clothes and gets his meals ready, at the right time. (Onuigbo, p. 100)

Her journey represents the broader struggle of African women who seek to balance personal ambition with cultural expectations. Similarly, in *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna resists forced marriage and asserts her right to love and personal choice. Although the novel’s tragic ending underscores the dangers of defying tradition, it also emphasizes the need for change within patriarchal societies. Emecheta’s portrayal of women challenges stereotypes that reduce African women to submissive figures. Instead, she presents them as intelligent, resourceful, and capable of challenging oppression. Her work has inspired a new generation of African women writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Lola Shoneyin, who continue to explore themes of gender and identity in contemporary African literature. Buchi Emecheta’s literary contributions extend beyond storytelling; they serve as powerful social commentaries on gender, colonialism, and identity. Through her novels, she gave voice to the struggles and triumphs of African women, challenging both traditional and colonial forms of oppression. Her nuanced feminist perspective, rooted in African realities, reshaped the discourse on women’s rights in literature. By portraying female characters who resist societal constraints and seek self-empowerment, Emecheta paved the way for more diverse and authentic representations of African womanhood. Moreover, her exploration of colonial legacies and cultural tensions provides invaluable insights into the complexities of African identity. Her critique of forced traditions, economic marginalization, and racial discrimination remains relevant today, making her works essential reading in discussions on gender and postcolonial studies. Ultimately, Buchi Emecheta’s legacy is one of resilience, advocacy, and literary excellence. Her influence continues to shape African literature and feminist thought, ensuring that her voice remains a powerful force in global literary discourse.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, incorporating textual analysis, historical contextualization, and comparative literary critique to explore the legacy and influence of Buchi Emecheta. The methodology includes Textual Analysis in which a close reading of Emecheta’s key works, such as *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Second-Class Citizen*, and *The Bride Price*, to examine recurring themes, character development, and narrative techniques. Comparative Analysis in which evaluating Emecheta’s contributions alongside other African feminist writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ama Ata Aidoo, to highlight her unique voice within the literary tradition. Historical Contextualization in understanding the socio-political landscape of Nigeria and the broader post-colonial African context that influenced Emecheta’s writing. Critical Reception for reviewing academic papers, literary critiques, and reading different interviews to assess how Emecheta’s work has been received over time. Feminist and Post-Colonial Frameworks for applying feminist and post-colonial theories to analyze how her narratives challenge traditional gender roles, colonial structures, and cultural identity.

The Legacy and Influence of Buchi Emecheta on African and Feminist Literature

African literature has historically been male-dominated, with early pioneers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka focusing on themes of colonialism, tradition, and nationhood. However, women’s perspectives were often sidelined until writers like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta emerged to challenge the dominant narratives. Emecheta’s works offer a counter-narrative to traditional African storytelling by centering female experiences and struggles. Emecheta’s storytelling is deeply rooted in the African literary tradition, but she also redefines it through her exploration of women’s agency. Buchi Emecheta was not just a writer; she was a revolutionary voice that disrupted the patriarchal and colonial structures of both African and Western literary

traditions. Her work transcends mere storytelling, acting as a bridge between the past and present struggles of African women. Emecheta's novels reflect lived realities, capturing the tensions between tradition and modernity, individual agency and societal expectations, oppression and resistance. Through her protagonists, she does not offer mere victimhood narratives but instead portrays the resilience, ambition, and complexities of African womanhood. Her literary journey was deeply personal, often mirroring her own experiences of marginalization as an immigrant, a single mother, and a Black woman navigating the rigid structures of British society. Yet, despite her reluctance to identify explicitly with feminism, her works embody the essence of African feminism one that acknowledges both the oppression faced by women and their enduring strength. By blending feminist and postcolonial narratives, Emecheta established a unique voice that continues to shape contemporary discourse.

This paper examines Buchi Emecheta's deconstruction of motherhood in *The Joys of Motherhood* with a focus on the possibility of motherhood leading ultimately to alienation. Using the theory of womanism, an African variant of feminism which exalts the peculiarities of African women and their circumstances, the paper analyses how the author frames the experience of the protagonist as a mother to interrogate how socio-cultural dynamics impact gender constructs and the larger contexts of gendered spaces (Ogunrotimi, 2019)

This paper critically explores her literary legacy, drawing on feminist, postcolonial, and migration theories while analysing her impact on African and feminist literature. It argues that Emecheta's work not only challenges patriarchal and colonial ideologies but also lays the foundation for a new form of African literary feminism that is both intersectional and deeply rooted in indigenous realities. Her characters, such as Adah in *Second-Class Citizen*, challenge the restrictive norms of both African and Western societies. Unlike male African writers who often depict women in secondary roles, Emecheta presents women as active agents navigating a world shaped by gender discrimination. This shift in perspective contributes to the evolving discourse in African literature, paving the way for later female writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Tsitsi Dangarembga. Her use of language also sets her apart. While many African writers, including Achebe, emphasize cultural preservation through the incorporation of proverbs and indigenous storytelling techniques, Emecheta employs a more straightforward narrative style. This accessibility makes her works widely readable, particularly for audiences unfamiliar with African traditions. Yet, her storytelling remains deeply tied to her Igbo heritage, reflecting the struggles and resilience of Nigerian women. Emecheta's writing is fundamentally feminist, though she often distanced herself from Western feminism, preferring to call herself a "womanist." Her novels interrogate the ways in which patriarchy limits women's choices, particularly in marriage, education, and motherhood. She does not merely critique African traditions but also examines how colonialism and Western influence exacerbate gender oppression. One of the recurring themes in Emecheta's novels is the oppressive nature of traditional African marriages. In *The Bride Price*, Aku-nna, the protagonist, is forced into an arranged marriage despite her desire for education and autonomy. Her struggle reflects the tension between personal agency and societal expectations. Similarly, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's life is defined by her ability to bear children, particularly sons. Her suffering reveals the harsh realities of a patriarchal society that values women primarily for their reproductive roles. A significant aspect of Emecheta's work is her exploration of migration and the intersection of racism and sexism. As an African immigrant in Britain, she experienced firsthand the compounded discrimination faced by Black women in Western societies. This experience is deeply embedded in *Second-Class Citizen*, where Adah struggles against both patriarchal African traditions and the racist British society that views her as inferior. Emecheta's portrayal of Adah's journey speaks to the broader experiences of the African diaspora, particularly the difficulties of assimilation and identity negotiation. Postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha discuss the concept of *hybridity*—the idea that migrants exist in a space of in-betweenness, belonging neither fully to their homeland nor to their new country. Adah embodies this hybridity, torn between her Nigerian upbringing and the expectations placed upon her in Britain. Moreover, Emecheta's depiction of the migrant experience challenges the myth of the West as a land of opportunity. While colonial discourse often framed Europe as a site of progress and modernity, Adah's story reveals the harsh realities of economic hardship, racism, and social alienation. Through this, Emecheta deconstructs the romanticized notion of migration, presenting a more complex and often painful reality.

Emecheta critiques the idea that marriage is a woman's ultimate fulfilment. In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah leaves an abusive husband, rejecting the notion that a woman's identity is solely tied to her marital status. This act of defiance is revolutionary in the context of African literature, where women were often portrayed as subservient. Through Adah, Emecheta challenges the notion of female dependency, advocating for women's independence and self-sufficiency. Motherhood is another central theme in Emecheta's works. However, unlike traditional portrayals of mothers as revered figures, she presents motherhood as both a source of fulfilment and oppression.

Buchi Emecheta applies Western feminist ideology of 'Motherhood' for criticizing the African patriarchal aspects of 'Mothering'. Motherhood is believed to be the central focuses of women's isolation and oppression. It is rightly said that, "the joys of motherhood is a kind of false consciousness, it really is a power relation and women are duped into thinking that it holds any promise of sovereignty or free expression (Balavatbhai, 2020).

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego sacrifices her happiness for her children, only to be abandoned in old age. This tragic ending subverts the romanticized image of the "self-sacrificing mother," highlighting the exploitation of women within both the family and society. Through this portrayal, Emecheta engages with feminist theories, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women's roles being socially constructed.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, African women are presented as second-class citizens and as a result, there is preference for boys to girls. In this text, the gender issue created is that it is better to give birth to a male child than a female one in the patriarchal Ibo society where the story is set. Consequently, premium is placed on the male child to the extent that when Nnaife's two wives, Adaku and Nnu Ego, become pregnant and Nnu Ego gives birth to a set of twins which are girls Adaku is not sure about how Nnaife will receive the news. (Jegade, p. 79)

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that women are conditioned to find purpose in motherhood, even when it leads to suffering. Emecheta's novels echo this sentiment, illustrating how societal expectations rob women of autonomy and fulfillment outside of childbearing. Emecheta strongly advocates for women's education as a means of liberation. Many of her protagonists, including Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* and Aku-nna in *The Bride Price*, view

education as their pathway to freedom. However, they face significant obstacles, as education is often considered unnecessary for women in patriarchal societies. Emecheta's emphasis on education aligns with feminist theorists such as bell hooks, who argue that knowledge is a tool for dismantling oppression. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks asserts that education allows marginalized groups to challenge dominant ideologies. Emecheta's heroines embody this principle, striving for education despite systemic barriers. Emecheta's work is not only feminist but also deeply postcolonial. She examines how colonialism intersects with gender oppression, creating double burdens for African women. Her characters navigate both the traditional constraints of their societies and the alienation of colonial rule. Emecheta's storytelling techniques also contribute to her unique literary impact. Unlike some African writers who incorporate oral traditions and non-linear narratives, she employs a direct, almost autobiographical style that makes her work accessible to a broad audience. This accessibility is part of what makes her legacy so enduring, her ability to reach both academic scholars and everyday readers. Her use of *bildungsroman* (coming-of-age narrative) is particularly significant. Many of her novels, including *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Bride Price*, follow young female protagonists as they navigate societal restrictions and forge their own identities. This structure, traditionally associated with European male protagonists (e.g., James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), is reclaimed by Emecheta to center African women's experiences. Additionally, her novels frequently employ irony and subversion. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the title itself is an ironic commentary on the burdens rather than the joys of motherhood. Through such techniques, Emecheta challenges readers to question the deeply ingrained societal values that perpetuate women's oppression. Emecheta's impact extends far beyond her own writing, influencing a new generation of African women writers who continue to challenge patriarchal norms. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for instance, acknowledges Emecheta's influence on her work. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie echoes many of Emecheta's themes, including the struggles of young girls seeking education, the oppressive nature of traditional family structures, and the complex dynamics of migration. Similarly, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) follows the trajectory of a young girl's struggle for education against societal expectations, much like Emecheta's heroines. This continuity of themes highlights the lasting impact of Emecheta's work in shaping African feminist literature. Even beyond African literature, Emecheta's emphasis on intersectionality recognizing the ways in which race, gender, and class oppression overlap aligns with contemporary feminist thought. Her works remain essential reading for discussions on race, migration, and gender, reinforcing her position as a global literary figure.

Emecheta's themes are still pertinent in today's social justice movements, influencing debates on race, gender, and immigration. Her work inspires contemporary writers, particularly women from Africa and the diaspora, encouraging them to voice their stories with courage and authenticity. (Magazine, 2025)

In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah moves to England with her husband, only to face racism and economic hardship. Her experiences highlight the struggles of African immigrants, particularly women, who are doubly marginalized by both race and gender. Emecheta's critique of colonialism is nuanced while she acknowledges the benefits of Western education, she also exposes the dehumanizing aspects of migration and cultural displacement. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity is relevant here. Bhabha argues that postcolonial subjects exist in an in-between space, navigating multiple cultural identities. Adah embodies this hybridity, struggling to assert her identity in a society that views her as inferior. Through her journey, Emecheta challenges the idealized notion of the "West" as a land of opportunity, revealing the harsh realities faced by African immigrants. Emecheta's influence extends beyond her own works, shaping the narratives of later African writers. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for instance, explores similar themes of gender, migration, and identity in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Americana*. Like Emecheta, Adichie challenges traditional gender roles and critiques both African and Western societies. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* also echoes Emecheta's themes, particularly in its portrayal of a young girl's struggle for education against societal expectations. The novel's protagonist, Tambu, embodies the same resilience seen in Emecheta's heroines, emphasizing the transformative power of knowledge. Beyond African literature, Emecheta's works have influenced global feminist thought. Her critiques of marriage, motherhood, and migration resonate with women's struggles worldwide, making her a key figure in transnational feminism.

Second-Class Citizen portrays the "Other" based on the existence of economic and socio-cultural differences as well as conflictual relationships between African indigenous people and British citizens where the British become the center while the African natives become subjected to the rule from the center. Emecheta portrays the "Other", African natives, as backward, inferior, and of lower social class. (Abubakar, 2021, p. 1538)

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta's literary legacy is profound, spanning African and feminist literature. Her novels provide a critical lens on gender oppression, colonialism, and migration, offering a voice to African women whose experiences had long been ignored. Through her fearless storytelling, she challenged societal norms, inspiring future generations of writers and feminists. Her work remains relevant today, particularly in discussions of gender equity, education, and immigrant experiences. By bridging African and feminist literary traditions, Emecheta solidified her place as one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Her legacy endures, reminding readers of the power of literature to challenge, inspire, and transform. Her legacy is more than just a collection of novels; it is a testament to the power of literature as a tool for social change. Through her fearless storytelling, she redefined African literature, giving voice to the silenced struggles of women. Her critique of patriarchy, colonialism, and migration remains deeply relevant, ensuring that her work continues to inspire and provoke thought. As new generations of writers emerge, Emecheta's influence remains unmistakable. Her works remind us that literature is not just about telling stories but about reclaiming narratives, challenging oppressive systems, and envisioning a more just world. Her words live on, ensuring that the African woman's story is never forgotten.

Reference

Abubakar, H. A. (2021, December). Otherness in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*: A Postcolonial Rendering. *11*, 1534-1539.

- Balavatbhai, V. H. (2020). Tale of African Women: Buchi Emecheta's a joy of Motherhood. *International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies* 2020, 2.
- Derrickson, T. (n.d.). Class, Culture, and the Colonial Context: The Status of Women in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. *Colby Library Quarterly*, 141-154. Retrieved from <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/download/7715/8772?inline=1>
- Jegade, O. O. (n.d.). A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. *academia.edu*. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/42077834/A_Feminist_Critical_Discourse_Analysis_of_Buchi_Emechetas_The_Joys_of_Motherhood
- Magazine, D. (2025, January 8). Buchi Emecheta: A Lasting Literary Legacy and Its Contemporary Impact. *Duchess Magazine*.
- Ogunrotimi, O. (2019, January). Notions of Alienation and Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*.
- Onuigbo, C. K. (n.d.). Gender and Sexuality: Analysis of Female Crisis in Buchi Emecheta's Novels . *International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences*, 2.
- The I Ching or Book of Changes*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1967.
- Umeh, Davidson and Marie. "An Interview with Buchi Emecheta." *Ba Shiru: A Journal of African Languages and Literature* 12.2 (1985):19-25.