

**Seeing Motherhood through the Lenses of Gendered Society in  
Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen***

**Shradha Gupta**

Research Scholar,  
Department of English  
& Modern European Languages  
University of Lucknow,  
Lucknow, U.P. India  
**DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.5.3.10**

**Abstract**

Mothering and motherhood are two different concepts. Motherhood is glorified in the world history whereas mothering is generally ignored. Motherhood is imposed upon women by the society convincing her to believe in its valour but during the whole process of motherhood, the challenges of mothering are never counted. Mothering. Motherhood is an institution defined by hegemonic groups to exert power on women. Motherhood, a monolithic term, emphasizes on the process of socialization of the future generation only by mother. During this process her own subjectivity and personal experiences are ignored and she is degraded to mere an object for catering the needs of her children. Her identity is not what she asserts but her identity is perceived as a mother. Buchi Emecheta, an eminent womanist writer has raised the issue of challenging motherhood in her novel *Second Class Citizen*. My article aims to analyze the novel on the grounds of conceptualized motherhood and its impact on the self-identity of the protagonist who single handedly raises her children

**Keywords-** Motherhood, mothering, female identity, Subjectivity

A mother is the female parent of a child. Mothers are women who inhabit or perform the role of bearing some relation to their children, who may or may not be their biological offspring. Thus, dependent on the context, women can be considered mothers by virtue of having given birth, by raising their children, supplying their ovum for fertilization or some combination thereof. Such

## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

*Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.*

conditions provide a way of delineating the concept of motherhood, or the state of being a mother. Women who meet the third and first categories usually fall under the terms 'birth mother' or 'biological mother', regardless of whether the individual in question goes on to parent their child. Accordingly, a woman who meets only the second condition may be considered an adoptive mother, and those who meet only the third a surrogacy mother. Mothering is a dynamic process of social interaction and relationships. The role of mothering is socially constructed and highly influenced by the gender belief system.

Many social scientists argue that one of the central gender norms for adult females is the desire to become a mother. This gender role is manifested in a “motherhood mandate”, which refers to the indoctrination of females to aspire to have children and raise them, this mandate involves the prevailing ideology of intensive mothering. In this ideology, a mother is depicted as being completely devoted to the care of her children, while sacrificing her own needs and interests. This type of mothering is “exclusive, wholly child centred, do regardless of their individual emotionally involving, and time-consuming”. Intensive mothering ideology paints a picture of a mother positioned within a biological nuclear family absorbed in nurturing activities. It remains the normative standard culturally and politically by which mothering practices are evaluated. The ideology of motherhood posits women as producers of children and power. These women in this context have to adhere to a particular ideology of motherhood. Their activities are restricted to child bearing and child rearing. This affects the position of women in these societies subordinating them to men. They are subordinated because of not being economically productive who have to adhere to a particular ideology of motherhood.

Motherhood has been a highly contested issue among feminists. Many feminists have asserted motherhood as a uniting element among women and have based their claim to rights on women on it. While many of the feminists think it as a major factor denying women their rights and equality. The main stream Feminist discourse up to 1980 took a critical approach to motherhood and

## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

regarded the rejection of motherhood as a pre-requisite for attaining equal status in the society. Eminent feminists like Simon de Beauvoir considered motherhood as the main feature which caused women to be seen as others. She felt that women are made to see motherhood as the essence of their life and the fulfillment of their destiny. She further asserts that women are repeatedly told from infancy that they are made for child bearing. The “splendors of maternity” are forever sung to her while the drawbacks of her situation –menstruation, illness and even the boredom of household drudgery –all are justified by this marvelous privilege she has of bearing children into the world. Later on Betty Friedan from the United States eschewed Beauvoir’s statement as it was a problem with no name and it was the root cause of unhappiness of middleclass educated suburban housewives were persuaded into the maternal roles and consequently felt unfulfilled and discontented. The de -valuation of motherhood was a consequence of patriarchal construction of sexual differences. Feminists refuted the assumption that motherhood is something innate to woman. They showed that the association of maternity with woman’s nature conflates biological and social motherhood denies motherhood as a work.

Feminists in 1970’s like Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow introduced mothering theories which challenged the notion of motherhood .They revealed that women’s subordination in society is resulted from this unequal division of labour that embarks all the nurturing responsibility on women restricting her to the household only.

Adrienne Rich in her famous essay *Of Woman Born* rejected the universality of woman's experience. According to her, the experience of motherhood can’t be universally positive and normative for all women. She challenged the romanticized notion of motherhood .Her social criticism reflects the feminist theme that the personal is political. Rich gives importance to the bodily experience of motherhood. This Theory of body is ultimately concerned with control. Motherhood as experience is controlled by woman while motherhood as an institution is controlled by man. She elaborated the term

## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

*Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.*

motherhood by differentiating it from the term mothering. According to her, the term motherhood refers to the patriarchal institution which is male defined and controlled and it is deeply oppressive to women while mothering refers to woman's experience of mothering which are female defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. The reality of oppressive motherhood thus just be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of empowered mothering. Adrienne Rich has also called for a change in the social structure. She asks for equality in parenting and relationships. Radical feminist Shulamith Firestone regarded child birth and child rearing as barbaric and the nuclear family as a key source of woman's oppression.

Nancy Chodorow blamed the sexual inequality in the society on the division of labour that assigned the women the task of child rearing. She used the term object relation theory to position mother as an object for the child as she was the first and the most important object of his life.

### **Motherhood in African culture**

Motherhood occupies a significant place in African culture. It is seen as something a woman is born for. In other words it is an important part in women's life. Motherhood is not honored instead it is imposed as a social duty on women to perform. This duty is not only limited to procreation and childrearing but it includes the proper upbringing practices of the baby.

Motherhood as practised in Africa demands self- sacrifice from the mothers in accomplishing their duty of child rearing. .The idea of self -denial is the center thought of motherhood. John S. Mbiti recognizes motherhood..."is central to African philosophy and spirituality ...no matter what the skills, desires and the talents of woman, her primary function is that of motherhood at least in Africa". Motherhood in Africa is regarded as blessing by god and therefore is very sacred while barrenness is considered as a sacrilege. The basis of conjugal life is the transfer of women's fertility to her husband's cultural group .the woman who begets children is seen as honored while childless women live a cursed life. She is in the words of Mbiti, "dead end of human life not only for

## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

*Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.*

genealogical level but also for herself. Maternal ideals are entrenched and valorized and motherhood becomes a synonym of female identity. It is prerequisite for social acceptance.

Many feminists have raised this issue in their works to portray the subordination of women. As motherhood imposed by the patriarchal society was to sustain a control over their life. Their natural ability to procreate was linked to social obligation to confine them to the household and it never let them think of their own identity and those who dared to think were categorized as bad mother. Motherhood stands for tolerance and self-sacrifice in African culture.

In literature the representation of motherhood is based on two different perspectives. The male writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka generally focused on the themes revolving around the male concerns and African culture excluding the experience of female characters be it a mother or wife. Many aspects of their femininity were not touched. Later on, it was the efforts of female writers like Mariamba, Flora Nwopa and Buchi Emecheta whose works gave a voice to the marginalized ones suppressed by power.

Buchi Emecheta, a late twentieth century Nigerian Igbo novelist is one of the most prolific and best known African writer in English. She has been the most sustained and vigorous voice of direct feminist protest. The centrality of her subject matter depiction of African women in contemporary African terrain earned her an undisputed place in African literature. Buchi Emecheta being a womanist probes in to the lives of black woman and gives a voice to their experience. In her autobiographical novel *Second Class Citizen* she has vigorously raised some controversial issues like glory of motherhood and female subjectivity. Adah the protagonist of the novel challenges the traditional notion of motherhood. She breaks the image of traditional stereotyped mother who were confined to their houses to look after their children. She works as a librarian and single handedly raises her children.

In phallogocentric society, motherhood and child rearing are the oppressive effects of Patriarchal domination. This system makes woman powerless forever.

## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

In this order man secures his domination over women biologically and socially. Although, Adah is educated and self-reliant still she can't get herself free from such kinds of obligations. Adah is a bread earner for her family besides of it she has three children to be taken care of. In England also Adah works in a library leaving her children in the care of her husband but her husband can't look after the kids and eventually children are left in the care of a white woman Trudy but her negligence towards the children makes Adah disappointed once again. It shows the emotional bonding of mother and children. Francis, her husband the father of the children, escapes from his duty to look after his children

Who is going to look after your children for you?" Francis asked one day when she was tucking the babies into their settee bed "I can't go on doing this; you'll have to look for someone. I can't go on looking after your children for you". (Emecheta, Buchi, *Second Class Citizen*, 45)

Mothering can become bliss for most of the women but in Adah's case it was a challenge to raise her children in a racist society. Moreover, she was living in nuclear family without a supportive husband. This had aggravated her problems. Her basic rights of reproduction were being violated by Francis that results in relentless and unwanted pregnancies and by the age of twenty two she becomes a mother of five. Recurrent pregnancies were obstructing her way to establish her own identity. Adah's unwanted fourth pregnancy chains her as she does not wish to be mother for the fourth time she wants to control her productivity therefore she visits Family Planning Clinic and learns about the jelly the cap and the pill and so many other things thoughtless means she wanted to exercise control over her body and motherhood in other words she was trying to take the power in her hand as it was her right to make a decision about conceiving. As she was already the mother of three children and she was merely twenty one.

Please could I have the pill? you see, I m not twenty one yet and if I had another child it would be my fourth and I originally came here to study and bring up two babies I brought from home. Can you help me? I need the pill. (Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* 142)

## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

Adah being a modern woman who wants to be ready with all equipments of birth control which is a denial to motherhood. She tries to break the boundaries of tradition which never allowed women to think rationally especially when it comes to institutions like marriage, motherhood, polygamy. Adah wants to come out of that image of obedient woman. She is fully determined to exercise her own will and she forges the signature of Francis on the paper given by the nurse but she couldn't be successful to avoid pregnancy which was now more threatening but Adah took it a challenge.

She now saw this situation as a challenge, a new challenge. When she was little and alone the challenge had been of educating herself, existing through it all alone by herself. She had hoped in marriage she could get herself involved in her man's life and he would share the same involvement in hers. She had gambled in marriage just like most people but she had gambled unluckily and had lost. Now she was alone again with this new challenge that included her children as well. She was going to exist through it all. (Buchi Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen*, 175)

Adah's struggle represents the struggle of every woman in male dominated society. The institution of motherhood is a strong chain that has bound Adam's feet. However she tries to break all these shackles she is unable to do so. If she leaves her children with Francis, she could pursue her dreams but would be categorized as heartless mother. She decided that if the worst came to the very worst she would leave Francis with her children since she had nothing to lose but her chains "...These chains were stronger than the iron chains because they were the chains of tradition. Escaping from her duty was an escape from the traditions which could never approve the self-identity of any woman instead it would demand the self-denial in carrying out the responsibilities of motherhood. A woman is known by the role she plays in the society be it a wife or a mother. Adah tries to cope up with the dual responsibilities of family and work place but despite of her utmost effort she can't avoid the recurrent pregnancies and when she decides to terminate her pregnancy she is brutally beaten and humiliated by



## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

Francis. He prohibits her from using any birth control gear. In Igbo society a woman is expected to bear a baby of children to extend family lineage .Francis is not able to break free from the cultural expectations about women's reproductive obligations. And Adah's decision to control reproduction was challenging the strong patriarchal system. Although he is the father of the children never concerned about their lives. For him Adah is a second class human and a slave who should have never crossed the boundaries of her culture. He could never tolerate her being an intellectual who could ever ask for her rights. But Adah was not going to retreat.

*Second Class Citizen* raises many questions on the role of woman in this patriarchal society. Francis was a parasite as he was dependent on his wife. He had given nothing to his wife except children whom he could claim fully his own. He was a big failure as a father too. The children were the result of his sexual hunger. He did nothing for them while on the other hand Adah was not only earning money but was also devoted to her children. She tells to Francis:

Yes "agreed Adah again "...can you Francis show me some vests or anything these children can lay their hands upon which you can claim to have bought for them? No Francis, you broke the laws of your people first,... And remember, I am not your mother. I am me and I am different from her. It is a mistake to use your mother as a yard stick. You never loved or respected her. You simply tolerated her I know now because it never crossed your mind to work and send her money like other Nigerian students do That should have warned me. In the short courting period we had I noticed you never thought of giving her anything. It was always you and you all the time and she a poor soul was always giving and giving to you ..." (Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen*, 172)

She strongly argues with Francis that he has done nothing for her family this once again incites his anger and he beats her. Adah seeks the protection from such abusive relationship but all the records related to her marriage with Francis and the birth certificates of children are burnt by Francis. Francis escapes from the



## *The Creative Launcher*

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E-Journal in English (ISSN-2455-6580)

Disclaimer: For Any kind of confirmation and Authentication visit the website of the journal.

charges declaring that they are not married and children are not his. He even says to the court, “I do not mind their being sent for adoption” (Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen*, 172).

This shows the exclusion of males from the responsibility of rearing up the children but they are forgiven on the ground as they are not assigned for this role and then what about the children...they are the sole responsibility of woman... they are the caregivers... Adah asserts her role in the last. She emerges as a bold lady to face the challenges of life as she very courageously declares in the court. “Do not worry sir. The children are mine, and that is enough. I shall never let them down as long as I am alive” (Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen*, 174).

She leaves the court as she was feeling tired because of her fifth pregnancy. She remembers that despite of her reluctance she had to give her body to Francis to be toyed with. She could overcome the circumstances but being a woman she could not overcome her physical weakness as Beauvoir points out that woman lacked control over her body in pregnancy.

### **Conclusion**

The novel challenges the views and also reflects the problems faced by a working mother. Women have to face a challenging life situation only because of motherhood. The society lays a huge responsibility of child rearing on woman because they considered the woman to be a compassionate nurturer but it doesn't mean that children are only her responsibility. Francis could also share the task of child rearing at least he could assist her but the rooted patriarchal thinking never let him think beyond of his masculinity For him Adah was only an object ,a second class citizen. It raises questions on the gendered identity where a man is the working supporter and woman has to look after the children at home. Being a black woman Adah experiences various forms of oppression. Problems faced by Adah as an immigrant, in rearing up her children were different from the problems faced by other women. Mothering was not a big issue for her if she had got support from her husband and society. The expectations of the society from a

mother never hear the voice of her. Her subjectivity is ignored by the institution of motherhood.

### **Works Cited**

Emecheta, Buchi. *Second-class Citizen*. G. Braziller 1974.

Khan A.A, Sukanya Ghosh. *Female Militancy and Cultural Orthodoxy in Buchi Emecheta*. Adhyayan Publishers, 2014.

Rich, Adreinne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience And Institution*. Norton, 1976.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religion and Philosophy*. Doubleday Anchor, 1970.