

# Infection in the Sentence: The Castration of a Black Woman's Dream of Authorship as Manifested in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*

Aseel Hatif Jassam, Hadeel Hatif Jassam

**Abstract**—The paper discusses the phallogocentric discourse that is challenged by women in general and women of color in particular in spite of the simultaneity of oppression due to race, class, and gender in the diaspora. Therefore, the paper gives a brief account of women's experience in the light of postcolonial feminist theory. The paper also casts light on the theories of Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous, two feminist theorists who support and advise women to have their own discourse to challenge the infectious patriarchal sentence advocated by Sigmund Freud and Harold Bloom's model of literary history. Black women authors like Buchi Emecheta as well as her alter ego Adah, a Nigerian-born girl and the protagonist of her semi-autobiographical novel, *Second Class Citizen*, suffer from this phallogocentric and oppressive sentence and displacement as they migrate from Nigeria, a former British colony where they feel marginalized, to North London with the hope of realizing their dreams. Yet in the British diaspora, they get culturally shocked and continue to suffer from further marginalization due to class and race and are insulted and inferiorized ironically by their patriarchal husbands who try to put an end to their dreams of authorship. With the phallogocentric belief that women are not capable of self-representation in the background of their mindsets, the violent Sylvester Onwordi and Francis Obi, the husbands of both Emecheta and Adah respectively have practiced oppression on them by burning their own authoritative voices, represented by the novels they write while they are struggling with their economically atrocious living experiences in the British diaspora.

**Keywords**—Authorship, British diaspora, discourse, phallogocentric, patriarchy.

## I. INTRODUCTION: BLACK FEMINISM AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S IMMIGRATION

**B**LACK feminism is a school of thought that focuses on the idea of the interconnectedness of all the forces of domination, i.e., race, class and gender. Intersectionality becomes a key term of black feminism. Black feminists, like Buchi Emecheta who prefers to be described as “an African feminist” [1], in their conceptualization of black women's life, underpin the principle of “the simultaneity of oppression” [2]. In other words, as Deborah King puts it, “the necessity of addressing all oppressions is one of hallmarks of black feminism thoughts” [3]. Given that race can be defined in many ways, the feminist historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham writes: “race is a highly contented representation of relations of power between social categories by which individuals are identified and identify themselves” [2]. In other words, Higginbotham racializes both gender and class. Accordingly,

gender and class come to be recognized as “racial categories that are given meaning through process of racial domination” [3]. What distinguishes black women experiences, as Frances Beal, another black feminism scholar, from those of both white women and black men is that it is an experience “marked by double discrimination” or what she terms “double jeopardy”, capturing the idea how “race and gender collude to constrain the lives of black women” [3]. Therefore, Black feminism as a theory tends to look at gender as a category that cannot be decontextualized from class and race. To put it in other terms, gender and class are embedded “within the context of race” [2].

As for the origin of the term, it was genealogically coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and is expanded in her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color” (1991) [4]. Deeply rooted in black women's experience, as a theoretical political and doctrinal framework, intersectionality, for Crenshaw, tends “to do justice to the forms of violence that operate in raced and gendered ways in black women's lives” [3]. In her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989), Crenshaw speaks about the injustice done to black women. She intensifies the multidimensionality of Black women's experience that has been distorted by the single-axis analysis meant to exclude Black women from the category of women; thus the theoretical erasure of their experience. Drawing an analogy between discrimination and traffic in an intersection, Crenshaw believes that the injury of a black woman in an intersection can be attributed to both sex discrimination and race discrimination [4].

During the sixties in postcolonial African nations, the African males usually tend to migrate more than their female counterparts do so as to get education at the hands of the white and if women migrate, they do it is because “their migration was more driven by their status as wives, than by profession, or the search for education” [5]. However, African females' migration from their motherland, Africa, as Nkiru Nzegwu has argued in her essay “Immigration and African Diaspora Women Artists”, has become a necessity rather than a choice so as to escape poverty, interethnic conflicts, and wars. In the past, African men only do migrate, Nzegwu continues to argue, for having “received immigration permits and African women

Aseel Hatif Jassam is with the College of Basic Education, University of Mustansiriyah, Iraq (corresponding author, e-mail: aseelhjassam@gmail.com).

Hadeel Hatif Jassam is with the College of Education for Humanities, University of Diyala.

emigrated as wives and fiancées to Britain ... they [African women] are now emigrating on their own cognizance” [5]. Black women immigrants, like the black Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, have moved from their African nations, where they culturally have not been treated equally to men and suffer from injustice, to Britain to pursue their dreams and expectations. However, they soon are met with challenges and they struggle if they are to fit in the host society. This immigration experience transforms (marks a shift in) one's identity that must be affected by the interplay of the different components such as the three intersectional ones that define black feminism: race, class, and gender. The impact of these three components is felt by Emecheta's protagonist, Adah as she moves to the UK, joining her student husband, Francis Obi. Accordingly, Emecheta's literary narratives that trace the immigration experience and transformation of her characters have not only served to place her “within the African canon, but also place her within another literary frame, namely that of Black British or Black diaspora writing” [5].

## II. PHALLOCENTRIC WESTERN DISCOURSE DECONSTRUCTED

Silence gives the proper grace to women  
(Sophocles 497-406BCE) [6]  
Now, I-woman am going to blow up the Law  
...let it happen, right now, in language.  
(Hélène Cixous) [7]

Phallogocentrism is a belief that is embraced by the male structures of power according to which the phallus is identified “as the source of power in culture and literature” [6]. Defined in such a way, Phallogocentrism has given rise to biased assumptions held by the male-centered and male-dominated patriarchal world. Postcolonial feminists have rejected this phallogocentric and patriarchal system adopted by white males. As a result, postcolonial feminism gets “engaged in a political and social struggle against male dominance” [6]. Seen as colonized subjects, woman as a term is rejected by postcolonial feminists, having believed “that such usage defines females by only their sex” [6]. As a belief, phallogocentrism is rooted in Freud's psychoanalytic postulates he reaches at as he starts investigating “the dynamic connection between psyche and soma” [8], to define hysteria as a disease. Hysteria is being defined as a 'female disease' not only because of the word hystera in Greek means womb, but also because hysteria as a disease has afflicted many “women in the turn-of-the century Vienna” [8], and was thought to have been “caused by the female reproductive system, as if to elaborate upon Aristotle's notion that femaleness was in and of itself a deformity” [8].

Freud's psychoanalytic postulates help Harold Bloom to construct his model of literary history which is intensely patriarchal in nature in the sense that he has described “literary history as the crucial warfare of fathers and sons” [8]. Intensely male in construction, the patriarchal Bloomian model is seen as “offensively sexist” [8] by feminist critics because he, through a psychosexual patriarchal lens, has described woman writer as unfit or even “to be anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider” [8]. Defined in such sexist terms, women's literary achievements are considered to be inferior, if not of no

significance. With these inferiorized views surrounding women, feminist critics advise woman writers to reclaim their lost voices in the male-centered world i.e., to make their voices occupy a space in the Western literature or to deconstruct the white European ruling-class man's words: “I am unified, self-controlled center of the universe ... the rest of the world, which I define as the Other, has meaning only in relation to me, as man/father” [9]. However, Bloom's male oriented theory of “anxiety of influence” [8] connected to authorship is reversed by many woman writers, white or even black, by their profuse and prolific writing achievements.

Theorizing the role of language, French feminists show how a woman's discourse must be her central preoccupation to be used as a weapon to counterattack the textual oppression exercised on her by the patriarchal world. Luce Irigaray, the French feminist theorist and psychoanalyst, has critiqued the psychoanalytic theories of reproduction which “has been based on the sexual division of labor” [10]. Given the strength of Irigaray's critique, this model of “sexual division of labor” no longer comes to hold for her analysis has given “a space for woman's subjectivity” [10], a kind of subjectivity that puts an end to sexual difference which the premise upon which the “patriarchal constructions of metaphysics” [10], as Margaret Whitford explains, is built: “these differences are...positions. ... One of the two poles is always privileged over the other, the intelligible over the sensible, for example, or man over woman. The main point is that metaphysics is based upon a process of exclusion and hierarchies” [10]. Offering new ways to conceptualize language, Irigaray redefines the symbolic order of metaphysics and enables women to move “towards a position where [they] can speak as subjects” [10]. Irigaray is of the point that women need not to succumb to the fate drawn to them or even mapped out for them by the masculine. A woman, she argues, must show her own potential whereby she can challenge the law for as long as the masculine law remains forcefully in power, women's “natures will remain amorphous” [7]. In other words, Irigaray advises women to have the urge to be present linguistically and have their own discourse because she will help man play the position of the masterful subject if she continues to be absent from the linguistic expression [7]. Metaphorically speaking, females' dreams of authorship need not to be congealed, but to be articulated so as to “break down the bastions of male law” [7]. Likewise, Cixous points out that a woman's desire to 'speak herself' is obliterated due to man's success to implement his desire for mastery through language, concluding that language is the “Empire of Selfsame” [7] that women need to break into so as to be enabled to fly and explode the law. By writing, women, Cixous suggests further, will be able to topple the repression structured by the masculine mind. She has seen in women's writing a powerful weapon to inscribe change and “create an elsewhere in which the other will no longer be condemned to death” [7] and at the same time a space where 'something else' after years prohibition and exclusion throughout history “can finally manifest itself” [7].

### III. THE TRIUMPH OF CASTRATED DREAM OF BLACK AUTHORSHIP IN THE BRITISH DIASPORA

Buchi Emecheta has published *Second Class Citizen* in 1974. Having witnessed a series of setbacks that burden women and prevent them from achieving social, intellectual, and economical promotion both in Nigeria and UK, where she migrates to in the 1960s and where she has witnessed that women, at the times of revolution in the 1970s, have also been calling for “equal pay, equal education and opportunity, free contraception, and abortion on demand” [11], Emecheta as an African feminist feels the urge to draw, through her semiautobiographical novel, *Second Class Citizen*, a picture of 1950s Igbo male-dominated society where even a girl child is not to be exempted from oppression and which legitimizes the sad conditions of a woman as the other since she (Emecheta as well as her alter ego, Adah) is born: “She was a girl who arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy. So, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth” [12].

In the Igbo culture, it is apparent that the birth of boys is celebrated while that of girls is not and it is rather met with indifference. Accordingly, to gain education in Lagos, Adah has to fight against odds for her parents have seen no wisdom to send girls to school: Boys were usually given preference, though. So even though Adah was about eight, there were still discussions about whether it would be wise to send her to school. Even if she was sent to school, it was very doubtful whether it would be wise to let her stay long [12]. Clear from the above passage that, even though Emecheta has explained how education is so much valued by Igbos who are depicted as “highly motivated by middle-class values” [13], to the point that they come to think of education as “one's savior from poverty and disease” [13]; no other choice than marriage to a man is to be considered valuable to Igbo women. In Igbo culture, women are inferiorized and treated as sex objects under the control and authority of their husbands. This is true of Adah's mother's beliefs regarding the expected domestic role a woman is relegated to and is supposed to play. Brought up by her mother to play this subservient role, Adah is made to devalue her potential as it turns out that she needs to take recourse to authority represented by men when true problems come up. This stereotypical presentation of gender roles is captured in the novel with Emecheta saying: “Somebody said somewhere that our characters are usually formed early in life. Yes, that somebody was right. Women still made Adah nervous. They had a way of sapping her self-confidence. She did have one or two women friends with whom she discussed the weather, and fashion. But when in real trouble, she would rather look for a man. Men were so solid, so safe” [12].

Adah's mother, as a social construct of the patriarchal society of Igbo culture, acts stereotypically and this accounts for her loveless marriage to her brother-in-law after the death of Adah's father, the town's first Nigerian lawyer who has received schooling as a lawyer in the United Kingdom, the dream destination and the imperial center that Adah, driven by ambition, desires to live in. It is this desire, using Kasim Husain's words, that “provides the novel with its agon” [14],

and through which Adah is made to recall the earliest memory of hers since she is eight years old, listening closely to her father talking about the UK: “The title “United Kingdom” when pronounced by Adah's father sounded so heavy, like the type of noise one associated with bombs. It was so deep, so mysterious, that Adah's father always voiced it in hushed tones, wearing such a respectful expression as if he were speaking of God's Holiest of Holies” [12]. In spite of the abject misery and exploitation that she has experienced after the death of her father as she moves to live with her mother's new husband, Adah manages to “win a scholarship in the highly competitive secondary school entrance examinations” [15]. Excelling in her performance at the school-leaving examination, she moreover succeeds to work as a librarian at the American consulate in Lagos. Fortunately, her job there enables her to enjoy “the comforts of middle-class life” [15], yet it is during that very period that she has met Francis Obi, a young Nigerian student who is to continue his studies in Britain and whom she accepts to marry, having thought that she will secure a better life condition and be protected and loved.

Finding in the UK the avenue where she can achieve her own childhood dream (to study in the UK), Adah marries Francis and joins him with their three children years later. Soon, the feelings of disillusionment are felt by Adah, having noticed that Britain “is far different from the fairyland she had brought up to conjure” [15]. Britain proves to be the antithesis of her expectations. She gets shocked to find out that the weather of Liverpool is so smoky. Like the climate, people also appear to her as emotionally cold and the city as silent as if it was empty of the social life she has experienced in stark contrast among “her tribal community and busy city life in Nigeria” [16]. In the British diaspora, Adah furthermore gets more shocks due to the racist attitudes held towards the colored people in their search for accommodation. Though she disguises her blackness, as she phones the land lady who is supposed to offer them an accommodation with good conditions, by pinching her nose, Adah is denied that offer immediately after the land lady's recognition of Adah and Francis's dark complexion. With the land lady telling them that the rooms that they are supposed to rent have been taken, Adah and Francis's opportunity to rent a house appears to be limited: they can only be given a space to live by Mr. Noble, a Nigerian man married to a white woman. What complicates Adah's condition and prevents her to have any upward social mobility is her violent husband, Francis Obi (Sylvester Onwordi's alter ego in Emecheta's life) who having witnessed his masculinity getting thwarted in London [17] for sharing the same social status of his wife as 'second class citizen' and failing to be the economic head of his wife and their five children, comes to compensate for this failure in his social and academic life by practicing his “ruthless hegemony within his own household” [17], battering Adah and possessing a white prostitute as a lover.

In Britain, Adah, unlike Francis whose chance to be civilized in England is bigger, if not has been extended to African woman like her, succeeds to move forward in spite of the different setbacks and actualizes her dreams. Adah's former education in colonial system enables her to have foot in England, work at

different three libraries, earn her living and be the breadwinner of her family. This is not favored by Francis, who tries by all means “to inject a feeling of inferiority” [15], into her. Met with failure many times, Adah's brutal husband deprives her “of what she values most - her children and her potential to become a writer” [15]. In the novel, readers are informed of Adah's dream of establishing herself as a writer. Staying at home for five months after giving birth to her fourth child, Dada, Adah reconsiders her old dream to write and so goes outside to buy some materials which can help her realize her dream: “Then her old dream came popping up. Why not attempt writing? She had always wanted to write. Why not? She ran to Foyle's and bought herself a copy of Teach Yourself to Write and sat down throughout all those months when she was nursing Dada and wrote the manuscript of a book she was going to call *The Bride Price*” [12]. Having purchased the book, *Teach Yourself to Write*, Adah starts reading it with enjoyment and getting more motivated and urged to write and have her own discourse. Taking her manuscript to her colleagues in the library at North Finchley where she works, Bill, her Canadian and first friend in UK has encouraged her to read James Baldwin and gain confidence and faith that black is beautiful [12], advising her to publish her manuscript that he metaphorically calls a “brainchild” [12]. Having achieved this feat, Adah senses fulfillment: “I felt so fulfilled when I finished it, just as if I had just made another baby” [12]. Thinking that her husband will share her achievement, Adah shows her manuscript to Francis who, instead of praising it like her colleagues, has snapped at her saying: “You keep forgetting that you are a woman and that you are black. The white man can barely tolerate us men, to say nothing of brainless females like you who could think of nothing except how to breast-feed her baby” [12]. Going outside for shopping one Sunday morning, Adah upon coming back home smells “the odor of burning paper” [12]; she is shocked to find Francis burning in front of her the entire manuscript which she dreams to read to her children when they grow up. With a tired voice, she tells Francis that “Bill called that story [her] brainchild” [12]. With the burning of the manuscript, Adah has burned their marriage certificate (gets divorce) and this empowers her to rewrite her manuscript and publish it in 1976, giving voice to her voiceless and castrated words, destabilizing the phallogocentric system and putting an end to oppression that pressure women in various cultures all over the world.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

One can infer that women are depicted negatively in literature since throughout history, they dare not to write or even hide behind the shield of pseudonyms. Giving this opportunity of authorship to be solely practiced by men, women have helped men to misrepresent them in literary works. Also, men get empowered to structure their representations on false and unjust assumptions that the West has propagated. Realizing how these assumptions have given men a sense of authority over women in all aspects of life to the point that they even come to ignore her existence, feminist writers feel the urge to advise women to give voice to the silenced that they call the

other. In *Second Class Citizen*, Emecheta deconstructs this patriarchal image by bringing both her and Adah's experiences to ink and paper, proving that women are capable of self-expression and self-representation just as her male counterparts.

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