

**BREAKING FREE: FEMALE EMPOWERMENT AND STRUGGLE AGAINST
PATRIARCHY IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *HEAD ABOVE WATER* AND *SECOND CLASS
CITIZEN***

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Abstract

This work explores the feminist perspective in Buchi Emechea's *Head above Waters* (HAW) and *Second Class Citizen* (SCC), two inspiring works that offer deep understandings of the struggles and resilience of African women. *Second Class Citizen* (SCC), a semi-autobiographical novel, follows the journey of Adah, a young Nigerian woman who battles systemic sexism and racism as she pursues her dreams in Britain. Through Adah's experiences, Emecheta highlights the intersectionality of gender and race, illustrating how societal structures oppress women of colour. In *Head above Water*, Emecheta's autobiography, she recounts her life story, providing a raw and intimate portrayal of her challenges as a single mother, writer, and immigrant. Both works emphasize the themes of self-determination, resilience, and the quest for identity and equality. Emecheta's narrative style combines personal anecdotes with broader social critique, making her work a powerful vehicle for feminist discourse. Through her depiction of strong female protagonists who defy patriarchal norms, Emecheta advocates for the empowerment of women and the recognition of their agency in shaping their destinies. These texts contribute significantly to feminist literature by highlighting the unique struggles of African women and their indomitable spirit in overcoming adversity.

Keywords: Autobiography, patriarchal norms, empowerment, resistance, feminist.

Introduction

Buchi Emecheta's semi-autobiographical novel, *Second Class Citizen* (1974), and her autobiography, *Head above Water* (1986), offer philosophical perceptions of the complex realities

faced by African women, especially those who navigate the dual oppressions of racism and sexism. Emecheta's narratives are deeply rooted in her personal experiences, reflecting the challenges she encountered as a black woman, immigrant, mother, and writer in a patriarchal and racially biased society. These two works provide a critical perspective through which to examine the intersectionality of gender, race, and class, and how these intersecting identities influence the lived experiences of African women.

In her novel, *Head above Waters* (1986), Buchi Emecheta explores the politics of self through the lens of gender, race, and class. Using Feminist theory as a framework, we can analyze how the protagonist, Adah, navigates and resists oppressive power structure in her personal and social life. Feminist Theory posits that female experiences are deeply intertwined with larger systems of power and oppression. Adah, a Nigerian woman living in London, faces discrimination and marginalization on multiple fronts. As a Black woman, she is economically disadvantaged and socially stigmatized. Adah's position at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities highlights the complexity of her struggle of self-determination.

One of the main themes in her work is the tension between individual agency and societal constraints. Adah constantly grapples with expectations and limitations placed on her as a woman of colour in a patriarchal society. She struggles to assert her autonomy and make choices that align with her desires and values. However, she is often thwarted by external forces that seek to control and subjugate her. Emecheta's portrayal of Adah's inner turmoil reflects the broader political landscape, in which women of colour find themselves. The personal is political, and Adah's struggles are emblematic of the larger systems of oppression that shape her world. Through Adah's experiences, Emecheta sheds light on how racism, sexism, and classism intersect to restrict the

agency and autonomy of marginalized individuals. Her narratives reveal how these women assert independence and make choices that align with their desires and values, despite the external forces that seek to control and subjugate them (Nnaemeka 1998).

The Politics of Self in *Head above Water*

In the long run, *Heads above Water* is a powerful critique of the politics of self in a society that seeks to silence and marginalize those who dare to challenge the status quo. By centering the experiences of a black woman in her narrative, Emecheta highlights the importance of resistance and resilience in the face of systemic oppression. Adah's journey toward self-actualization is a testament to the power of individual agency in the face of overwhelming odds.

This study of Emecheta's *Head above Water* will explore her appropriation of the notion of the subject as it acknowledges both the relations of power and identity and the efforts of the female subject to elude the constraints against her. Understanding the relations of power for Emecheta is the first task in the project of reclamation. Ordinarily, power means ability or capacity. For Emecheta that ability must first manifest the female subject's use of language especially to express herself, her potential, and her vision of her world. The expression of self begins with the use of the first personal pronoun 'I' and its forms. The important fact here is that we are presented with the first person 'I' which manifests as a woman. Emecheta begins the "Introduction" to *Head above Water* thus: "For someone who has previously published more than ten books..." (1). This "someone" is 'I', an author wielding the pen to write an autobiography. But that "someone" is also me who has written novels. It is I, who have a peculiar set of experiences that I am going to share. Furthermore, she tells us:

Nonetheless, I am going to make the attempt, though not in the manner of many autobiographies, on a day-to-day basis. If I had to write of all my forty or so in full, the way I experienced them... I will therefore write episodically, touching lightly here and there on those incidents which I have dwelt in depth in my books... (9).

Emecheta says ‘Writing my autobiography...’ Here she portrays herself as a subject, who is capable of taking action as an agent through writing. This subject is conscious of herself and can proclaim her identity through her voice as a writer. We realize the subject’s identity through her use of language which manifests itself through her use of the first-person singular pronoun ‘I’ and the first-person possessive pronoun ‘my’.

The repetition of the word ‘I’ is evident in what Leech and Short (2007) have described as “expressive repetition” (Qtd Okoronkwo and Udumukwu 2024). Repetition becomes expressive when it highlights an emotive heightening or stress to the repeated meaning (199). What animates the repetition of the first-person pronoun here is its juxtaposition with an individual experience, which is “the way I experienced them”. Here the juxtaposition of “I” with experience is in agreement with the traditional definition of autobiography as a form of narrative. According to Adams (1994) “autobiography is a form of narrative characterized by a desire both to reveal and to conceal an attempt at reconciling a life with a self, as a result, its power comes from the paradoxes ... of its sense of reference to the world” (483). And for Olney (1973) autobiography is “loosely described as the writing of a life by the person who has lived it” (10). Identically is this relationship in the excerpt below as it portrays an autonomous self:

In *The Rape of Shavi* is my hope for us all that not only will the nuclear war be a non-starter, but that the white European woman from the North will regard the black woman from the South as her

sister and that both of us together will hold hands and try to salvage what is left of our world from the mess the sons we have brought into it have made. (1)

The excerpt above shows that Emecheta is aware of the discrimination and segregation faced by black women not just from the black or white men but also from their fellow white women. Hence, she hoped that the white Europeans could see the black women as sisters and together they could save their world from the ruins caused by the men. Through her voice, she acts as an agent seeking unification.

Writing as a Cure: The Therapeutic Power of Language in Emecheta's Narrative

As a noun the word “cure” means “something that corrects or counteracts” or “an agent used to restore health”. Likewise, when used as a verb, it means “to rectify an undesirable or unhealthy condition; make better, correct, heal, relieve, improve, remedy, or redress a situation”. Cure in the medical field means a drug or course of medical treatment used to restore health. However, it also means anything that corrects or relieves a harmful or disturbing situation. Further, it means the act or process of preserving a product. As a process of preservation, it means to undergo a change, to become different, or for something to lose its original nature. (11)

Given these points, how then can writing be seen as a cure? In short, writing can be said to be a form of cure in the sense that through writing, a writer tends to preserve an idea that probably would have been lost if it had not been documented. The writer also corrects or redresses an issue by providing a solution to things that pose problems to society or the individual. Finally, writing is a cure as it shows the process of change from something old to something new. Norris (1987), while discussing the ideas of Jacques Derrida, has affirmed that “writing also is a form of cure” (p. 30). He says writing is a cultural advance since with it, humans can build up a documentary of

their memory (p.30). What this means is that humans, through writing immortalize their thoughts, making them available to be transmitted through reading even after the person is long gone. Hence, writing serves as a medium to save a memory that should have been lost with time.(11)

For Emecheta this moment of self-reflection begins with the appropriation of writing not simply as a skill but as a tool to achieve a cure. For her, writing is therapeutic. And it is in this capacity of realizing it as a cure that we can understand the interconnectedness between agency, responsibility, and the female self. The act of writing is generally perceived as a process of putting experience down on a piece of paper either through the use of pen, ink, or pencil. People write mostly for preservation. They do so to safeguard some ideas or experiences. This preservation could either be on a culture or an identity. When people write to preserve their identity, it is done in an attempt to immortalize themselves, so even when they are long gone, they will forever be remembered. The same also applies to culture. When people write, it is in an attempt to communicate who they really are; to be known; to correct a notion, and to bring about change.

Here, Emecheta sees writing as therapeutic. Therapy is a remedy for diseases. What Emecheta emphasizes then is that writing has healing powers. However, she does not mean therapy in its medical sense nor does she see herself as a doctor. Rather, therapy (cure) for her signifies consciousness, freedom, and liberation. In the same light, Emecheta argues that if writing is therapeutic, autobiographical writing which is about oneself is also a form of cure for it provides one a kaleidoscopic view of one's life. The term kaleidoscope is a tube containing mirrors and pieces of coloured glass or paper, whose reflections produce changing patterns when the tube is rotated. Just as this tube produces a changing pattern, autobiographical writing produces different reflections of a self. In other words, autobiographical writing shows the growth of a person from

ignorance to knowledge, from unconsciousness to consciousness. Thus, the portrayal of opposites in autobiography entails binarism. (Okoronkwo and Udumukwu,11) This is also in line with what Freud (1923) showed in *The Ego and Id*. He recognized that the act of putting thoughts and feelings into words could alleviate psychological distress. This process of externalizing internal experiences can reduce the intensity of negative emotions and provide a sense of relief. For him, writing is not just a therapeutic tool, but a bridge to the unconscious.

Furthermore, through writing an individual's identity is realized. Identity could be personal or cultural. Personal identity refers to the way one perceives oneself through those elements that portray one as a person such as looks, character, and career, among others while Cultural identity is an identity formed by a society. Cultural identity, therefore, is an identity perceived based on one's membership to a group such as nationality, ethnicity, or religion.

Voices of Liberation: Unveiling Female Agency and Identity in Emecheta's Works

In the first place, the title, *Head above Water* shows the relationship between agency, voice, and language. 'Water' is not seen here in its ordinary sense but it is symbolic for domination, trouble, challenges, and so forth. 'Head' can be used to refer to an individual person; it also means a leader or an expert; also it is the part of the body of a human or animal which contains the brain, mouth, and other sense organs. The head as the part of the body that contains the brain suggests that the person can reason and for one to be able to reason means that the person has consciousness. It is this consciousness that makes the person an autonomous being, a self, one who has freedom to define oneself as a subject. In this case, the self with a 'head above water' is a woman. The head nevertheless contains the mouth which contains also the voice used to produce sounds. The woman's voice hence defines her identity, more so proclaims her as a 'self', a self that is

conscientized and has the ability to take action. 'Head above water' as a phrase implies the struggle to survive hard times and consequently, this struggle further exaggerates the act of taking an action. This action is geared towards the survival of domination and oppression in an environment that tends to suppress women. This 'self' Emecheta, makes use of language as an instrument to assert herself into history and to redefine herself as a subject of action that has been liberated through writing for as she asserts, writing produces cure. This self as a subject is a woman who has gained consciousness and can take action through the use of voice and language. The female subject does not drown but rather writes herself into freedom (Okoronkwo and Udumukwu, 12). Similarly, we also see this relationship manifest in the excerpt below, showing an individual with a sense of self who can act to liberate herself:

..., yet I knew even that, like my parents, I was trapped in this New Thing. But of course, to me and my friends at the Methodist Girls' High School, it wasn't a New Thing anymore. It was becoming a way of life... However much I admired the village life, I knew that for sheer survival I had to make a go of the education the school was offering me free when almost all the girls in the school were paying. (16)

Black women are oppressed from every angle and denied equal rights. After the death of Emecheta's father, her education was going to be sacrificed in order for her younger brother Adolphus to be educated. Emecheta being fully aware of the merits of being educated would not let that happen so she enrolled and passed the scholarship examination that got her into Methodist Girls' High School. Through her voice, we realize her identity as a student. She also portrays herself as one capable of making decisions that would affect her future. Hence, challenging the traditional patriarchal domination of women based on inequality. Through voice which manifests

also in form of writing, Emecheta emphasizes the importance of education. When the result came out, she gained scholarship into the Methodist Girls' High School and this takes her into a new identity. Identity is what someone is known for and for Emecheta, education was becoming a way of life to her.

Therefore, education was becoming a part of her identity. Emecheta thus sees herself as an agent who is a woman with consciousness, and an identity. She is also ready to liberate herself from ignorance to knowledge through the act of gaining education. For her education is a means of survival. This however reminds us of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave", (Lavine 1984) as he (Plato) describes humans who have been bound on their necks and legs to the wall in a cave with just a reflection of light shooting into the cave displaying their images. Plato argues that if one of them is taken out of the cave, at first the individual's sight would be blurry until the eyes get accustomed to the light and the individual begins to recognize those shadows as they exist in life. If taken back into the cave, the individual's duty would be to educate or enlighten others, moving them from ignorance to knowledge. In this case, Emecheta is the agent whose duty is to liberate herself from ignorance by acquiring Western formal education. The language here is denotative because it talks about the experiences of an agent (Emecheta) who lived. This language manifests itself through the use of pronouns. Emecheta in the course of her narration moves from a personal pronoun to a possessive pronoun. Still, through her language, we see a mixture of cultures which she terms 'New Thing'(16). This 'New Thing' refers to the Western formal education which leads to the assimilation of language and culture. This assimilation provides for a new identity (a hybrid self) which is a mixture of both the Igbo and the White man's culture and language as with Emecheta. Indeed, with the above relationship, Emecheta asserts herself as a 'self'.(13)

In *Second Class Citizen*, we also see this male child preference playing out. The preference for the boy child over the girl child is a phenomenon witnessed in many cultures across the globe. It is also seen in the Igbo culture where the author comes from. As a woman, if you have children, and you do not have a boy child it is as though you have no child. The Igbo culture values male children over female because they believe that it is the male child that will carry on the father's name while the girl child would only be married off. The narrator introduced Adah by saying:

She was not even quite sure that she was exactly eight, because, you see, she was a girl. 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 she was so insignificant" (Emecheta 1).

Adah is viewed as a disappointment and insignificant because of her sex. Adah was born when a male child was being expected, so, no one bothered to take note of when she was born. Therefore, one could see the marginalization of female gender in the society. Adah is made to endure severe discrimination even in her family just because she is a girl. This continued for a long time even when she was finally married out to Francis. Francis too is from the same community as Adah but now lives in London.

Francis too has that cultural belief in a male child. When Adah and her children visited England, when Francis saw them at first the narrator explains that Francis was delighted with Victor (Vicky) and not the other children and he said "Just my image, I can now die in peace!" (33) This statement shows the consolation that Francis has in Victor; having someone that would continue his lineage. Adah's experience at home has grossly affected her psyche. Somehow, she is conditioned to accept her condition, so, at the hospital in London, when Vicky was ill, the nurse asked Adah "is Victor

your only child?” Adah answered, “...Vicky is not, there is another, but she is only a girl” (62) because she is aware of the importance of a male child and the high regard of males over a female child in her society. Her response not only embarrasses the nurse, but shows the concept of a girl child from the culture Adah comes from, as seen in the conversation between Adah and the nurse. The nurse’s confusion is written in her voice as she retorts: “only a girl? What do you mean by ‘only a girl’? She is a person too, you know, just like your son” (62).

Adah’s behaviour at the hospital epitomizes the culture she comes from. Her response to the nurse categorically states how boys are preferred in Igboland to girls. She has been thought shame and she is aware that the security of a woman as “fully married” in Igbo culture is assured only by giving birth to a baby boy. Women, who give birth only to girls, stand the chance of losing their husbands. The men look for women who can give them boys, who will immortalize their names. The women are meant to understand and believe that they are inferior to men. To support this, Ihueze (2022a) posits that, “A wife loses her identity, and when she becomes a mother, her power and prestige are reflected in her offspring, but if she only has female children or none at all, she loses any real standing. ... Women suffer as captives to culture, tradition and patriarchy...” (312). Adah’s younger brother Boy, is sent to school and Adah is left behind to stay with her mother. Her mother, who grew up in this culture, believes that there is no need for Adah to go to school. Adah was disappointed, she probably felt that her mother was going to stand by her but rather her mother is tied to the traditional ideology that a woman needs no education but should grow only to be married off and bear children for her husband. Even if she would go, it would just mean to learn how to count, and then learn a trade, or learn how to sew as a way of supporting her husband. Thus, Emecheta explains that even though the Igbo people value education highly and see it as a way of escaping poverty, “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 is sent to school, it was very doubtful whether it would be wise to let her stay long” (9). In the midst of these circumstances, Adah’s younger brother began school before Adah.

Emecheta’s narrative makes it clear that women are meant to see themselves as second-class citizens and to have a low opinion of themselves. It is the kind of treatment these women are subjected to that made them, with time, also came to believe the myths imposed on them by men and have a low opinion of themselves. Women are to take men as their confidants. Men are considered to be the stronger sex while women are the weaker sex. Adah’s mother is brought up to believe that girls and women are subservient to men, which makes her have a low opinion of herself, and invariably take recourse to men when real issues come up.

In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah is maltreated just because of her gender. A girl/woman is left to her own design when it comes to support. For instance, as mentioned earlier, her birth is not significant because she is a girl. She is denied equal rights with her brother, who is sent to school before her. If she had not staged a drama and run away to school, she would not have attended school. This is not to last for long as Adah is withdrawn from school after her father’s death. She is later sent to one of her uncles, who enrolls her in a poorly equipped primary school with the aim of marrying her off.

Breaking Chains: Female Autonomy and Resistance in Emecheta’s Narrative Journey

Emecheta in *Heads above Water* redefines herself as an individual, a human, and a self in the excerpt below:

I could hear the voice of my chi saying, ‘As long as you keep writing and producing books, just as you used to make babies, you’ll never be pregnant...’ This may sound outlandish to readers but a contraceptive pill had never passed my mouth, I don’t even know what they look like. It is very possible not to regard sex as the main reason for our existence. Women are capable of living for so many other reasons. That afternoon, those first copies of *In the Ditch* made me aware that probably one of my reasons for being here is to write. And because writing that comes from one’s inner-most soul is therapeutic; it could also probably be contraceptive. (70)

Emecheta as a subject, functions as an agent whose duty is to inform the ignorant woman through her own experience as she says, it is possible to regard sex as not the main reason for our existence as there are so many reasons one can exist for. Emecheta gives herself as an example saying one of her reasons for existing is to write. Through the use of ‘our’, a first-person possessive plural pronoun, Emecheta refers not just to herself but to all other women of all cultural backgrounds. Hence, through her narrative, she challenges the traditional notion that women exist solely for the purpose of pleasing the man. Emecheta says that the writing that comes from the inner soul is therapeutic, if so, she says it could also be contraceptive. Just as her chi would tell her that if she continues to write and produce books, just as she makes babies, she will never be pregnant. Pregnancy here is not to be seen in its natural sense rather it means Emecheta will never be able to conceive or take in any form of ill, suppression, or domination. Writing as contraceptive means, just as contraceptives are used to remove or avoid unwanted seeds, so is writing. Through writing, Emecheta purges herself of all forms of oppression. Silence as a form of voice is used here through the use of elliptical marks ‘...’ and through this the reader is allowed to fill in the blank space. Through her voice, she portrays herself as one with consciousness who goes into the act of writing to proclaim her identity and provide a cure for herself and others. Without language, there will be

no identity. Emecheta therefore makes use of language figuratively as she likens writing to a cure. Her language makes use of the pronominal as well as the rhetorical question. Through the use of language, therefore, Emecheta presents herself as a subject and an agent who has a voice and can take action to cure herself from all forms of colonization. Colonization as a form of domination manifests from the Western world as well as the patriarchal tradition that emphasizes the rule of males to the disadvantage of females. Her letter to the ILEA requesting for grant:

..., I poured all my bad words into a letter and sent it to the ILEA. I wanted a grant, and I had by now learnt from Social Theory that the grant was my right, since I had paid full tax for six years. But I posted mine. I accused them of persecuting me because ... I was still young, and because they were all heartless, brutes and slave drivers and I hoped God would condemn them to an everlasting fire where all the African jujus would make sure they roasted forever. I got a reply within four days. And ... I got a full grant, back paid. I marched to my nearest garage and bought a car for £300 and used it to learn to drive (55)

The subject is self-conscious in the sense that she knows her powers are in her written words as she uses it to get what she wants. She represents herself as one who is enlightened and not as one who is ignorant as she tells us that the grant is her right for, she paid her tax. So, she went into action as an agent to cure herself from all forms of suppression through her letter. She accused them of being unjust, bringing out elements of racism (... I was black) and inequality (... I had no husband). These bracketed phrases show that she knows the situation of women in her society. She probably would have received the grant earlier if she were white or if she had a husband. Her language is bilingual as she mixes the Igbo word 'juju' with English words. Also, there is a mixture of culture which manifests in the mixing of traditional religion and Western religion as she

combines her hope of condemnation from God introduced by the white missionaries and the African jujus on the ILEA for not letting her have her right. Thereby producing a hybrid self. A self that has attributes of both languages and cultures. Language also manifests in the use of the pronoun 'I'. Through Emecheta's voice, we realize her identity that she is a young black mother without a husband, and that she is a student as well as a writer. Through Emecheta's action of writing which is geared towards a goal, came her reply. Before the new semester began, she got a full grant, back paid. With the raise in her financial situation, she went into action of getting herself a car worth £300 which she used to learn to drive. All these, define her as an assertive human. (15-16)

In Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, she also asserts herself through her writing. There is a projection of a powerful compelling voice with a determination to resist subordination. Feminism stresses that women should confront the male superiority image or dominance, even in the face of highly repressive cultural beliefs and roles attached to them traditionally, they should strive and assert themselves.

Adah, the protagonist of *Second Class Citizen*, just like other women in traditional African society, is prevented from expressing herself. She is to remain at the whims and caprices of her husband, Francis, even though he is an irresponsible fellow. Francis, apart from being an irresponsible man is violent and abusive. Throughout the novel, Emecheta shows vigorously a set of descriptions that display the different forms of violence in the African community. The protagonist, Adah, remains caught in patriarchy as Francis proves to be an abusive and oppressive husband. Once in England, Francis' repeated failure in his exams takes a toll on his relationship with Adah. Adah, after the birth of her fourth child Dada, decides to stay at home for five months. Since all four children are

under the age of five, she cannot bear to leave her kids under the care of another woman. After taking the eldest to school, she takes the remaining three to the park for an hour or two, and then she goes home. Her old dream and desire to write are gradually coming back to her, so she goes and buys materials that could help her realize her dream as narrated succinctly:

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" (162).

She buys the book, Teach Yourself to Write, reads it quickly, and starts enjoying her writing: "The more she wrote, the more she knew she could write and the more she enjoyed writing. She was feeling this urge: "Write; go on and do it, you can write" (164). Adah puts everything that is lacking in her marriage into her book. "During the time, she was writing it, she was oblivious of everything except her children. Writing, to her, was like listening to good sentimental music. It mattered little to her whether it was published or not, all that mattered was that she had written a book" (164). The urge to write and write more which Adah experiences as she begins writing her manuscript The Bride Price. Adah takes her manuscript to her colleagues in the library at North Finchley where she is employed. Her colleagues, especially Bill, commend her effort and ask her to publish it. Bill calls the manuscript "her brainchild". Adah is so fulfilled in achieving this feat but is considering in her mind if she could actually be a writer saying to herself, "I felt so fulfilled when I finished it, just as if I had just made another baby, she tells Bill, and he replies: 'But that is how writers feel. Their work is their brainchild ... Books tell a great deal about the writers. It is your own particular child'" (166).

Adah decides to show her manuscript to her husband as a way of sharing her achievement with him. She tells him that her colleagues have praised her work. Instead of the support she was expecting, she was rather insulted and called brainless. Francis snaps 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” (167). The comment, ‘you are a woman and black,’ by implication means that a woman should have no part in trying to write or be creative. A white woman could attempt writing, but the fact Adah is not just a woman but also a black disqualifies her from even conceiving of becoming a writer. Here, we see Francis implying that both race and gender are factors that would or could hinder Adah from achieving her goal as he says ‘You keep forgetting what you are...’. Francis’ unsupportive words and insults do not discourage her. Adah decides to move on and continues with her writing. She continues writing unperturbed and this irks Francis who takes the manuscript and sets it on fire while Adah was away shopping. Adah comes back that Saturday morning and perceives the smell of burning paper on their stove. On getting closer, Francis puts the last paper on the stove. He burns the entire manuscript. Adah has dreamt of reading the book eventually to her children when they grow up as well as to her grandchildren. She exchanges words with Francis, her voice small and tired:

Bill called that story my brainchild. Do you hate me so much that you could kill my child? Because that is what you have done.

‘I don’t care if it is your child or not. I have read it, and my family would never be happy if a wife of mine was permitted to write a book like that.’

‘And so you burnt it?’

‘Can’t you see that I have?’” (165)

The burning of the manuscript was the last straw that broke the camel’s back as Adah decided to call it quits for their marriage. She decides she can never forgive Francis and can no longer live with him. Most people would see Adah as wayward or as a woman unable to keep her home, but Adah knew that she could only liberate herself from the constant torture and oppression once she left the marriage. Hence, Adah becomes an agent of action who can take decisive decisions to liberate herself from patriarchal dominance.

Finally, we see embedded in this excerpt drawn from *Head above Water* the portrayal of a liberated self:

I got home at seven. My family had already called the police. I don’t think those policemen understood that I love my family very, very much, but that I needed time to escape. If not, I would have drowned. Doing things like that, rather impulsive to them, kept me afloat. Kept my head above water. (184)

The subject is a woman, who has consciousness that she would drown if she did not take a little time away from her home to relax. Thus, she initiated an act as an agent to liberate herself to survive. This action is what led to a newfound identity as a free woman as she proclaims her freedom by saying ‘I sometimes stay two long nights ... all by myself’. Language hence functions denotatively for it tells us the period in which the event took place which is in the 1980’s. These qualities of truth we see in the form of facts, histories, and experiences manifest through the use of pronouns ‘I, my, myself’. With the relationship between agency, voice, and language shown above, Emecheta portrays herself as a ‘self’.(16) Helen Cixous (1976) in her feminine writing,

The Laugh of the Medusa encourages women to write their stories because men have been writing on behalf of women for too long:

Men have been writing according to their perspectives and have always been the voice. Since it is women who are relegated to the background and considered as the other, it is women who bear the brunt, signifying that women wear the shoe and know where it hurts. Evidently, it is women who are the victims that understands the plight of their fellow women better and proffer solutions to their problems (44).

When women write about themselves, their problems, their experiences, and their bodies, other women will learn from them. It gives courage to other women to speak out and write so that the marginalization that women experience can come to an end.

In Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Adah is a victim of a slavish marriage which is one way that women are objectified. She is also a victim of domestic violence. Adah's husband, Francis hits her in the smallest argument even when she is pregnant. Adah's marriage to Francis can only be described as exploitative. She is a victim of an abusive marriage. Since she works at the American consulate as a librarian, her monthly salary is used to take care of Francis's parents and siblings. When Francis learns that she is working for the Americans and has doubts about being married to someone who earns more than him, his father chastises him and asks him to marry her since the whole money she earns will be brought to their family. In his words:

You are a fool of a man, you are. Where will she take the money to? Her people, who did not even come to congratulate her on the arrival of baby Titi? Her relatives, who did not care whether she lived or died? The money is for you, can't you see? Let her go and work for a million Americans

and bring their money here, into this house. It is your luck. You made a good choice in marriage, son” (SCC 24).

Francis's doubt about marrying someone who earns more than him shows his low mentality and his level of maturity. Her working at a prestigious place should be a plus to him. It should be something he should be proud of but instead he doesn't want to marry her because he believes she earns more. This shows the inherent patriarchal nature in him. A man who wants to rule in all areas. He does not want the woman to be above him in any way. However, he gives in to the belief that her money would be for his family alone and she would have no say over her money and what to do with it once she is married to him.

Francis exploits her sexually whether she is in the mood for it or not, and when she refuses to give in to his sexual needs, she is thoroughly beaten. For Francis,

A woman is a second-class being, to be slept with at any time, even during the day, and if she refused to, have sense beaten into her until she gave in; to be ordered out of bed after he had done with her; to make sure she washed his clothes and got his meals ready at the right time. There was no need to have an intelligent conversation with his wife because, you see, she might start getting ideas” (SCC 164).

The above comment shows that Francis only sees women as objects of sexual gratification. They are only to be used for child bearing and house chores. They were there to satisfy all the desires of the man and nothing more and had no right or whatsoever to refuse his demands. Francis lacks a sense of responsibility. He does not care for the welfare of his wife and children. As a student in London, he does not want to work to support Adah but is only interested in impregnating her to give her more mouths to feed. Adah becomes the breadwinner and feels bad whenever she falls

sick and cannot go to work. In Igbo culture, a man works hard to take care of his family, at least to feed his family. Francis is a total failure to both his wife and his children. He cannot read hard to pass his exams but blames his failure on Adah for asking him to look after his children.

Adah has four children in five years. She is not allowed to use contraceptives and when she goes and gets one without the permission of her husband Francis, she pays for it with a beating. Francis calls their neighbours in London to tell them how Adah intends to turn into a prostitute, and he writes a letter to his parents in Nigeria informing them as well. Adah's complicated situation led to her going home with the wrong size of cap (contraceptive device) from the clinic. She has a sense of guilt. She does not even know how to put in the cap. She has just one room which she shares with Francis and the children and so has no sense of privacy. She fixes the cap as quickly as she can in their washroom. Being naïve and inexperienced, she fixes it badly which affects the way she walks. Later at night, Francis finds out and beats her to a stupor, stopping only when the neighbors intervened. Francis is convinced that if Adah who came to London less than a year previously, could be smart enough to fit herself with the contraceptive device behind his back, a device he believes is invented for prostitutes and single women, then there is no doubt about the fact that she would go behind his back to sleep with other men. After the disgrace which Francis subjected her to, by calling the tenants and exposing their family issues to them, Adah decides that this event is the last straw, the one that breaks the camel's back in their marriage.

Conclusion

Emecheta in *Heads above Water* and *Second Class Citizen* offers a compelling exploration of the politics of self through the lens of feminist theory. By examining Adah's struggles within the larger context of power and oppression, Emecheta invites readers to reflect on how personal experiences

are shaped by societal forces. Through Adah's story, we are reminded of the importance of solidarity, resistance, and self-determination in the face of adversity. Through her narratives, Emecheta emphasizes the power of writing as a tool for self-liberation and the assertion of identity, particularly for African women who navigate the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Ihueze (2022b), supports that writers should, "...present their female characters as clever, ambitious and forward-thinking. They (should) demonstrate the bravery of women in a world that strives to stifle their ambition (394)". For Emecheta, writing is a form of resistance and a means of reclaiming her identity in a world that often seeks to define and limit her.

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