

**FROM MUTENESS TO VOCALITY: NIGERIAN
WOMEN IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *SECOND-CLASS
CITIZEN* (1974-1989) AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI
ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS* (2003)**

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Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) was a prolific and award-winning Nigerian-British author of 15 novels, books for children and plays. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977), on the other hand, is another Nigerian author who has been living in the USA since 1996. She is the author of the novels, short stories and non-fiction which have been awarded by different organisations. Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (1989) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) are two novels in which Emecheta and Adichie create female Nigerian-Igbo characters who are initially depicted to be suffering from the stereotyping, oppression, and discrimination inflicted by the social, traditional, economic and familial structures. These structures inherent in the Nigerian-Igbo societies silence women by dictating and enforcing secondary roles as mothers and wives who are forced to marriages and maternity at very young ages, and the house chores. Nigeria's past as a colony of Britain for 100 years (1861-1960) and the four coups after independence, the Biafran War, the Civil War in the late 1960s for secession, the multilingual repertoire of the country where Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Fula, Pidgin English and Nigerian English are the languages spoken by the majority of the population, the multi-ethnic structure of the country where almost 250 ethnicities inhabit with three

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major ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Ibo/Igbo, the multi faith population where almost 50% are Muslim and the nearly 50 % are affiliated with Catholic, Anglican, Methodist churches are the pillars in the history of Nigeria and these historical events make the background of their novels. Particularly the colonial past of Nigeria, multilingual and multi-faith structure of the country find reflection in their novels and serve to deteriorate the condition of women who suffer from social, economic and traditional problems.

Although Emecheta and Adichie are writers of different generations, they have a lot of similarities as far as their education, ethnic background, themes in their novels and lives are concerned. Both Emecheta and Adichie had creative writing education, and Emecheta went to the United Kingdom and Adichie travelled to the United States of America when they were 19 for education. Both are ethnically Igbo and Christians, and both are self-declared feminists although Emecheta said she was a feminist with a small 'f'. Both Emecheta and Adichie centre young girls in the focus of their novels, coming of the age, Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* and Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* and their novels are autobiographical where these two young females as well as Beatrice and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* are depicted to be endeavouring for breaking the marital, familial, social and economic boundaries en route to emancipation and self-actualization.

The plot of *Second-Class Citizen* unfolds in the 1960s and *Purple Hibiscus* has a setting of the 1990s. The setting for the first two chapters of *Second-Class Citizen* is Nigeria, the remaining 11 chapters take place in Britain, and the entire *Purple Hibiscus* happens in Nigeria although Adichie offers glimpses into the life of Aunt Ifeoma and a few other Nigerian immigrants in the USA in the last chapters. In Emecheta's novel, bribery, polygamy, bride price, poverty, depravation, division between the poor and the rich, lack of resources are troubling people. On the other hand, in *Purple Hibiscus* in which the story takes place 30 years after the plot of *Second-Class Citizen*, Nigeria is still depicted as a country where coups are begetting coups in a vicious cycle. Bribery, corrupt politicians, ministers and police officers, drug traffickers, torture, brutality, censor and oppression on media and lecturers, missing people, bomb-blasts, letter bombs, hawkers, unsafe and bad roads, fuel and water shortages, strikes of lecturers, doctors, lab staff and medical administrative staff, students' riots, contagious diseases like malaria and typhoid, nepotism, cronyism, corruption are troubling the Nigerian people of all ethnic background. All the problems employed in the novels apparently debilitate and mute particularly the women who

are exposed to the destructive effects more than the males as they are also portrayed to be suffering from the oppressive mechanisms inherent in all the levels of the society.

Indeed, in addition to all the problems afflicting the society as a whole, Adah in *Second-Class Citizen*, Kambili, Beatrice, and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* silently and patiently put up with more challenges in their lives because of their female identity. Taiwo (1984) explains that the taboos and traditions of the Igbo culture stipulate that “*a girl is inferior to a boy; a wife is valuable only as a source of producing children; a woman without a male child is despised by the society; a father is allowed to marry off his daughter to any man of his choice – the girl and her mother have no say in the matter*” (103). Evidently, Adah’s birth and the birth of her first girl, Titi, are disappointing for the families who apparently favour boys. This is painful for Adah to see that “*Everybody looked at her with an ‘is that all?’ look*” (Emecheta, 1989: 96) when Adah comes home with Titi from hospital. Since her childhood, Adah’s life is burdened with house chores, extra work, and care she has to show in order to survive and succeed in life. As Oha (1996) claims, Adah’s problems are rooted in the patriarchal Ibo culture which denigrates girls and allows proper education only for the male, and “*in which a woman is punished mercilessly when she offends, or is believed to have offended, and a culture in which the female child is a commodity for sale to the highest bidder*” (292-293). The traditions of her community make her life harder than those of boys like all the other females as she is born into a society where women have secondary and subservient positions. Her mother is inherited by her uncle after his father’s death, boys are given priority for education, bride price plagues the society, widowhood is difficult, girls are forced to marry at a very young age and burdened by perpetual maternity, women suffer from brutality of their sometimes parasitic husbands and polygamy. Adah, seeing a woman who waited for a baby for 17 years in Britain, reasoned that she would be bothered by psychological pressure in Nigeria, or the husband would have a second wife. In *Purple Hibiscus*, too, similar issues are seen throughout the novel. The Igbo society in Nigeria “*not only condemns women who cannot have children, but unmarried and divorced women as well*” (Töngür, 2018: 145) so, the main reason why Beatrice is tolerant and even grateful to her tyrannical husband, Eugene, is that he does not bring or impregnate another woman who is willing to come to him without the bride price as they are pushed by their families despite Ifeoma’s protests.

In both novels, physical and psychological violence exerted by men to women is used commonly as a tool to silence women and to force them

to obedience and acceptance of their secondary status. In *Second-Class Citizen*, children are caned and smacked by their parents and teachers for trivial reasons as it happens to Adah who is caned by her teacher simply for smiling and caned 103 times for keeping two shillings with which she is supposed to buy meat for her entrance examination to the school she would like to attend. Domestic violence does not end in her childhood because her husband, Francis, turns out to be a villain who slaps and beats Adah mercilessly many times particularly after their move to Britain although he leads a parasitical life in contrast to Adah who strives to make their ends meet despite her perpetual pregnancies and little children.

In Adichie's book, Papa Eugene is an abusive tyrant domineering in the house over his wife and children and he is overly controlling the lives of his family by scheduling their daily routine minute by minute and not allowing them any time for watching TV or listening to music. As a result of "Papa's rigid enforcement of domestic order" (Andrade, 2011: 94), the kids and Beatrice are passive, silent and obedient. He gets furious and resorts to brutality if he decides any of the members of his family violates his rules, neglects the religious rituals and if they are not successful enough at school. When he reasons that his wife and his children are going out of Catholic life styles, he quickly transforms into a monster who beats, tortures and punishes them violently for coming second in the class, for sleeping in the same house with their own grandfather, for "desecrate[ing] their tongues" with "food sacrificed to idols" (Adichie, 2003: 49) with a stick, punching them on the face, throwing objects at them, spilling hot water on their feet. Ironically, he is kind enough to allow them the stick they are going to be beaten with. Kambili has her period, cramps and needs a painkiller. Papa thinks that she has broken and desecrated Eucharistic fast and beats them all with his belt for this improper and disrespectful act. Just because Beatrice feels nauseated before going into the church, Eugene beats Beatrice cruelly breaking a small table on her belly, and she is hospitalised and miscarries. Eugene does not hesitate for a moment to throw a very heavy prayer book to his son, Jaja, when he refuses to go to communion. Although Eugene misses Jaja, the book breaks Beatrice's figurines on the étagère, the only private items she possesses and cares for.

In the subordination and oppression of women in both novels, religion is used and abused by the clergy and by the men. In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah is depicted as a member of the Anglican Church with Catholic Christians around her. Since her childhood, she has been subjected to religious indoctrination and teaching by the missionaries at the Methodist

Girls School and her teachers who preached Adah to be meek and submissive at home. Thus, they tried to subdue her in a passive, ineffective and unproductive life which is mainly devoted to serving husbands and raising children. During her education “*Those God-forsaken missionaries! They had taught Adah all the niceties of life, they taught her by the Bible, where a woman was supposed to be ready to give in to her man at any time, and she was to be much more precious to her husband than rubies*” (Emecheta, 1989: 28). Sometimes when what she is taught about religion clashes with her needs and desires, she feels confused and tries to find solace and justification for her misbehaviour and sinful act. Francis who frequently changes his religion according to his whims, usually a Jehovah’s Witness abuses his religious beliefs to belittle women, claiming that woman was made from the ribs of a man, and she was called ‘woman’ for that reason.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa is drawn as a devout Catholic and a zealot who was trained by the missionaries, too. He is very strict in the Catholic rituals and insists Jaja and his daughter do everything according to the rites. He hates everything he associates with traditional religion of his father, which he denounces as paganism, including the funeral rites. He is intolerant to his own father and refuses to live with him because he is a pagan who is “*worshipping gods of wood and stone*” (Adichie, 2003: 33). He does not allow his children to stay with their grandpa or eat or drink anything in his house. He offered to help his father financially on condition that he converted. He also attempted to convert his sister and offered Ifeoma a car in return for her conversion, joining a Catholic church, stopping wearing makeup and sending Amaka to a convent school but she refused. Papa liked his father-in-law because of his light skin and his speaking English all the time with a heavy Igbo accent, speaking Latin, his devoutness to Catholicism, his insistence to be called Grandfather instead of Papa Nnukwu or Nna Ochie, and his help to the missionaries in the conversion of his people. Rather than feeling sorry for his father’s death, he is more concerned with whether he converted on his death bed and whether he was given extreme unction. His devotion is evidently superficial as it does not “*deter him from violence*” (Dube, 2018: 230) and his tyrannical and selfish attitude to his family members is the most effective weapon to hush Kambili and Beatrice. In other words, the father is drawn as “*the symbol of patriarchy whose mere presence sparks off the fire of danger that keeps the females under fear, tension; so they are silenced*” (Astrick, 2018: 48).

In this context, Francis’ and Eugene’s obsession for the English language is significant because they are intolerant of their own mother tongues, Igbo

and Yoruba, and they oblige family members to speak English and the far-ranging effects of the British cultural hegemony causes coercion of the females by the males. As McLeod (2000) opines, British colonial structure was established “*by persuading people to internalise its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonisers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world*” (18). He is mentally and emotionally conditioned to look down his own culture and language because he is “*too much of a colonial product*” (Adichie, 2003: 12) who changes his accent to sound more British at Kambili’s school and with white people. As Stobie (2010) observes, “*Kambili’s father Eugene is the emblematic colonised. Having been educated at a Catholic mission school in England, he is a mimic man who speaks English, is religious observances and constandy emphasis*” (424). Eugene has internalised inferiority of his own culture and superiority of the white English men. So, he voices his hatred of Igbo songs sung during sermons as he thinks they are part of godless Pentecostal churches rituals. He does not like to say his prayers in his mother tongue, and he refuses to talk to the local priest in Abba because he speaks Igbo and because he is neither white nor English on the pretext the priest is not divine enough. As a matter of fact, he only speaks Igbo when he is angry. He forbids his wife and children to speak Igbo among the other people in order to “*to sound civilized in public*” (Adichie, 2003: 12) although Jaja and Kambili speak Igbo with their mother at home when their father is absent, with Father Amadi and at Aunt Ifeoma’s house. As Dube (2018) notes, “*he associated speaking English with civilization*” (229) and therefore he avoids his native tongue and his Igbo name as if they were something to be ashamed of and avoided. Francis, on the other hand, is another typical example of mentally and spiritually colonised people who believe that speaking their mother tongue is shameful and disadvantageous. He threatens to cane Titi, who is a talkative baby in Yoruba, if she speaks Yoruba instead of English, causing verbal retardation of his own daughter.

Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* is not immune to problems in Britain where she goes with great hopes. Indeed, the main impulse beyond her wish to go to Britain is her aspirations and expectations for a better life and self-actualisation as she is lured by the “*liberating aspects of Western culture*” (Barthelemy, 1989: 560). Initially, she does not intend to stay in Britain in the rest of her life as she desires to be known as a “*‘been to’, which was a Lagos phrase for those who had ‘been to’ England*” (Emecheta, 1989: 19). However, during her stay in Britain, she fails to accomplish her dreams as she finds herself as a second-class citizen despite her qualifications. She

comes across and therefore she is hampered by bad housing, class distinction, hunger, poverty, bad bugs, unemployment and underemployment, poverty, eviction, racism, cold weather, house shortage, ghetto life, isolation and abject rejection in Britain. Although she lived a relatively comfortable life in Nigeria and she never felt her skin colour was an impediment for her, in Britain she is made to feel the double yoke of being a woman and being a black woman (Töngür, 2018) rather than finding comfort, peace of mind and better life. In *Purple Hibiscus*, too, the Nigerian characters who have been aspiring for a better life in the USA are disappointed and frustrated in a similar way as they find themselves in jobs which are quite under their qualifications, skills and education. Chiaku is rather pessimistic about America as she comes to believe that Nigerians are second-class citizens with her experience at Cambridge “*I was a monkey who developed the ability to reason ... Every day our doctors go there and end up washing plates for oyinbo because oyinbo does not think we study medicine right. Our lawyers go and drive taxis because oyinbo does not trust how we train them in law*” (Adichie, 2003: 171). Auntie Ifeoma also complains about her need to work at two jobs, “*one at a community college and one at a pharmacy, or drugstore, as they call it*” (Adichie, 2003: 206) despite her diplomas, certificates and experience as a university lecturer.

Despite all odds, the female characters in the novels manage to survive and break the chains in their lives in different ways. In spite of “*five little children, poverty, black skin, and a female body*” (Frank, 1982: 495), Adah proves a courageous girl who can take risk to achieve her aims during her difficult childhood as she realises that she has to achieve on her own and fend for herself in the discriminatory society. Unlike the majority of the women in her society, she grows dissatisfied with the secondary roles she is confined to on the basis of her gender. She is portrayed to be challenging these roles and struggling for the better with her outspoken wit, blunt honesty, independent spirit, and strong personality. She learns not to bow down to physical and verbal violence. and mobbing throughout her life. She criticises her mother for her passivity and decides that

She would never, never in her life get married to any man, rich or poor, to whom she would have to serve his food on bended knee: she would not consent to live with a husband whom she would have to treat as a master and refer to as ‘Sir’ even behind his back. She knew that all Ibo women did this, but she wasn’t going to. (Emecheta, 1989: 19)

Her insistence and resolution to have education, her marriage to a man who is unable to pay her bride price, her move to Britain after sponsoring her husband for some time to fulfil her aspirations are all signs of her strong personality and her transformation from a miserable village girl to a woman who can cope with her five little children. As Sougou (1990) claims “*Adah’s marriage survives in Lagos because she consents to defer to tradition, and conforms to the stereotypical image of a good wife*” (512). But in the UK, after remaining silent and raising her voice against Francis’ brutality for some time and turning a blind eye to Francis’ affairs, she decides to take reigns of her own life. She hates and rejects the stigma of ‘second-class’ and subservient status in life. When Francis attempts to beat her again, she starts hitting back and biting him and she decides to divorce. She gives ultimatum to Francis to stop bothering her and to take care of himself financially. She is fitted with a cap for family planning, and she attends the relaxation birth classes, regretting the unnecessary pain she experienced before and orders flowers for herself to the maternity ward in order not to feel humiliated. She starts reading fiction and books by philosophers and black writers as she decides to bring up her children to pride in their blackness. She finds work at the British Museum, rents a two-room flat for herself and starts writing the manuscript of *Bride Price*. As Ojo-Ade (1989) claims, “*Independence is the hallmark of Adah’s existence, and marriage makes that possible. But independence comes at a high price*” (183-184) because in the end, Francis beats her mercilessly and sends her and her children out of their home. Francis does not let her to take anything from the house as he burns her manuscript, the marriage certificate, her passports and children’s birth certificates out of malice and vengeance. She is just allowed to have only a box of clothes for the children for whom she is given the custody after a long and tiring legal procedure.

Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* is drawn as a rather diffident and shy girl who is suffocated by the domestic violence and oppression of her fanatically religious father who does not allow them to fraternise with their friends at school, to watch TV, to listen to music, to talk loudly. When Eugene unwillingly allows Kambili and Jaja to visit Aunty Ifeoma’s family in Nsukka, Kambili and Jaja enjoy freedom and a different life style as they have got rid of the constant control and interference of their father for the first time in their lives. Although they are devoid of amenities, they take for granted in their house, they like the company of their cousins and the other youngsters with whom they spend time. After their lifeless and cold house with no feeling, Kambili’s development as a young woman begins there as a

result of the freedom, she starts to enjoy there like applying make up for the first time, friendship with her cousin Amaka, falling in love with a young priest, Father Amadi, and learning to use her voice. As a matter of fact, as Meher (2014) underlines *The Purple Hibiscus* starts and ends in silence and the silence at the end “marks the wholeness of Kambili’s metamorphosis” (209) as Kambili slowly veers towards self-awareness and her true identity as a result of her “*complex journey to selfhood*” (Andrade, 2011: 94)

Kambili’s mother, Beatrice, is drawn as a silent, obedient and passive wife who does not raise any objection to her subservient position in the family and who seems to be silently resigned to her fate. She is grateful to her husband for not marrying, sleeping with or impregnating any other woman who is pushed to Eugene by their families without a bride price. Another reason why she endures the incessant beatings is her relatively prosperous life in Nigeria. The third reason why she puts up with him is that he is a charitable person who generously helps the poor, the needy, the children, and donates to the hospitals, orphans, needy, and victims and veterans of the civil war. However, she is so much tired of her tormenting husband that she takes the most drastic step and poisons her husband slowly to his death.

Eugene’s sister, Auntie Ifeoma, is the exact opposite of Beatrice as she lives her life as single mother of three children. Although she is a university lecturer, her life is not as comfortable as Beatrice’s. But she is a resolute, strong and nonconformist woman who defies the conventions and the regime in her own way despite losing her job. She also refuses to accept financial help from her brother who offers her a car in return for her conversion, joining a Catholic church, stopping wearing makeup and sending her daughter to a religious school. She declares “*I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things*” (Adichie, 2003: 67) in addition to her resistance to the “*public pressure to remarry*” (Dube, 2018: 223). In contrast to their unmunna and friends, she also recommends Beatrice to leave her brother. Ifeoma also beats the children with a stick, but she is described to be “*setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She did it all the time believing, they would scale the rod*” (Adichie, 2003: 158). She does not hesitate a second to sell her old car to pay the expenses for visa and travel to the USA, and agrees to work in two jobs just to make a living for her and her children. Obviously, all the female characters in the novel “*slowly rise up to resist Papa Eugene’s violence in the most subtle and unexpected ways*” (Dube, 2018: 228) but they end up victorious in their own ways.

Although Buchi Emecheta in *Second-Class Citizen* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* wrote their novels in different decades, they show that there is not much change in the lives of most Nigerian-Igbo women from the 1960s to the 1990s in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual postcolonial Nigeria. The female protagonists of in these novels, Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* and Kambili, Beatrice and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* are oppressed, discriminated and left voiceless by unfair structures of patriarchy, traditions, domestic violence, malformed religious beliefs, economic problems, marital issues, house chores and detrimental impact of colonialism for a long time. However, throughout the novels, the Nigerian-Igbo female characters in the novels slowly but resolutely walk to self-actualisation and emancipation overcoming all the cultural, social, familial and economic barriers. They are tormented by double yoke of being a woman and being a black woman but in time they turn out to be the ones who decide upon their present and future without the dominant father and husband figures with their determination and courage. They are able to break the despotic and unfair chains and they transform from muteness to vocality with their voices heard louder than the males in their lives.

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