

ART AND PROPAGANDA IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S SECOND CLASS CITIZEN

Virginia U. Ola
Department of English & Literature
University of Benin, Nigeria

Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* was published in 1982, the fifth in a series of novels dedicated to the examination of the place of African women and, occasionally, of British women, in society, the disadvantages which make it difficult for them to realize their true selves in society, however talented or ambitious they may be.¹ Altogether, these novels furnish the most sustained and vigorous defence of the cause of women in African literature. Emecheta's voice is one of direct feminist protest aiming at an explicit confrontation with what she considers to be a male-oriented world. Her novels also provide an insight into those weaknesses and misconceptions in the women themselves which tend to perpetuate their humiliation and state of subjugation. Commenting on this aspect of her work, Lloyd W. Brown writes:

In Emecheta we detect . . . an increasing emphasis on the woman's sense of self, as the writer has matured and as that maturity enables her to deal more and more adeptly and convincingly with the subtleties of characterization and private introspectiveness. With Emecheta the fervour and rhetoric of protest — that is, the explicit and unequivocal denunciation of the sexual status quo — have not diminished. If anything, she has become increasingly successful in blending the rhetoric of impassioned protest with her maturing talent for characterization.²

Several African writers championed the cause of the African woman in the 1960s. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu* were some of the earliest attempts in this area. *This is Lagos and Other Stories* carried Nwapa's campaign from the village to the city and captured in a terse style the ongoing sexual intrigues, chaos and mis-

fortunes under which her women, single and married, have to live.³ There is always a brooding sense of tragedy behind her stories. Nwapa approaches the question of female individualism from a stance in which it is invariably tempered by what Brown calls "a deep and complex loyalty to the indigenous culture and its own mystique — the mystique of close family ties and sacred family obligations", so that Efuru and Idu remain rebellious, self-willed and independent while at the same time respecting those obligations which quite often threaten their attempts to achieve a fulfilling sense of themselves as distinct human personalities. Buchi Emecheta's voice and style are clearly more militant; and quite often her hostility and direct denunciation of the social and sexual subjugation of her female characters evoke comparison with the literary protest of western feminists, who are also, in the broadest sense, engaged in a search for the woman's social equality and individual fulfillment in the west. No other African writer has so far channelled his or her artistic talent so completely to the defence of a cause.

Such a dedication has its advantages and disadvantages. Emecheta's strengths are: the convincingness which goes with her first-hand knowledge and ever personal experience of the characters she describes; the intensity, the vigour and directness of her expressions; the social realism which colours her works, the thorough and detailed nature of her descriptions and her total capturing of the social picture of Nigeria around the early part of the century, especially in the yearning of both men and women for education. The disadvantages stem mainly from the propagandistic nature of her works which often makes artistic detachment a difficult task, leads to generalizations and exaggerations against the object of protest. Her sympathy for her female characters is often counter-balanced by spite for their male counterparts. There are instances of banality and stylistic sloppiness in most of her work, and the strong autobiographical base of most of her writing forces her to see herself as the paradigm of all women, especially African women, who in her novels feature throughout as victims, but whose own weaknesses of character, the author handles most uncritically. This fault is most glaring in *In the Ditch* and *Second-Class Citizen*, both of which suffer from a weakness for which John Povey has criticised many African novels, and from which he dissociates Cyprian Ekwensi. In Povey's words.

The most significant thing is that Ekwensi is a professional writer. Not for him those one-shot "first" novels, the thinly disguised autobiography in which the turns of the plot most precisely match the biographical information proffered on the dust-jacket. There has been regular assertion that the second novel is crucial in that it is likely

to be the first book that does not present undisguised experience in the form of a tale told by an omniscient author.⁴

Emecheta's first two novels fall into this category, and while it is not impossible to write a successful novel from biographical sources the effort on the author's part at artistic detachment seems much more rigorous. Much of the thematic and stylistic lapses of these two novels stem from this autobiographical foundation, which often interferes with balanced character assessment and analysis, just as the author's dissatisfaction with certain tenets of Ibo customs interferes with her perception of the role of her women. In *In the Ditch* especially:

. . . Emecheta's rhetoric of protest often betrays symptoms of an uncritical response to Western modes of perceiving, and describing Africans. Africans appear too often as "natives" in her works, and there are the familiar Western contrasts between "Civilization" on the one hand, and Nigerian "superstitions" or crudeness on the other. This acceptance of the old Eurocentric standards is all the more disconcerting, and self-defeating, in a writer who is so obviously preoccupied with inequality and oppression as they are manifest in both language and social custom.⁵

In the Ditch traces Adah's struggle to survive and bring up her five children alone in a London slum after the break-up of her marriage with Francis, a selfish and lazy student of accounting, whom she had married just before his departure from Nigeria for studies overseas. Emecheta's vision here embraces her own trials and those of other women in similar situations, for she realises that women of all races and national backgrounds share the humiliations and hardships that flow from the double handicap of being poor and female in London. Her denunciation of African men for their cruelty to their women is most noticeable in this book, and her recourse to vague generalizations detracts from the total achievement of the book. Ironically, Adah's criticism tends to exclude English men despite ample evidence of such cruelty to their own wives. Such conscious or unconscious oversight stands out in this episode where Adah "cursed all African men for treating women the way they do", because she had heard that an African student was about to abandon his pregnant English girlfriend (*In the Ditch*, p. 157). The effectiveness of such an uncritical

tical indictment is marred by the fact that the book is devoted mainly to the disadvantages of women in English society, and because the victims of unemployment prove that the example of male callousness which the author chooses to attribute to African men is so clearly shared by non-African men as well. This is the case with most of her books. Despite these shortcomings, *In the Ditch* is significant because Emecheta has used her own personal experiences in Europe, as wife, mother, student and sociologist to produce what Brown called "the only major body of writing by an African woman about the situation of women in the west."⁶ The book is even more significant because these experiences are placed within a broad context of social injustices in Great Britain, the west as a whole, and the Third World, thus moving her messages from a particular to a universal level.

Second-class Citizen takes the reader back to the heroine's childhood and adolescence in Iboza. It recreates her determination and ordeal to acquire an education by individual effort, and her job as a librarian in Lagos. This period ends with her marriage to Francis whom she soon joins in England. The hasty marriage shows signs of eventual collapse from the time of her arrival, and the succession of quarrels, beatings, and unplanned pregnancies is narrated in great detail. It is the tragic story of the misfortunes and eventual loss of self-confidence by an erstwhile determined and confident young woman. Her singular fight with her family to achieve this education demonstrates her ambition and foresight. She even undergoes physical punishment for diverting the two shillings given to her for meat for the family towards the payment of her entrance examination fee to a secondary school. She accepts these hardships and impediments as the normal aspects of any dream, such as she had for education and a better life. Her initial strength of character endears her to the reader but her later problems do not come as a surprise. The total portrait of the protagonist is that of a victim, orphaned early in childhood, exploited by a substitute family of an uncle and his children, and finally bullied and abused by a selfish, egotistical and insensitive husband, from whom she finally parts with her five children into a hostile world of poverty and racial discrimination. In narrating this story, the novelist succumbs to some major stylistic pitfalls which mar her total achievement in the work. Once again, the novelist's vision is clouded by her own unfortunate

marital ordeal which forces her into biased generalisations about Nigerian men, women and society, and prevent her from self-assessment.

Characterisation is another weakness in the novel. The characters in the book are sharply divided into villains and victims, the protagonist being the major victim. The family members, the husband and most male members of the society are the villains. This tendency to see human beings in such sharp, unqualified distinctions is unrealistic, since the facts of the story show the opposite. The novelist places most of the responsibility for the heroine's misfortune on society while in fact her problems are the result of her own unrealistic approach to issues, her gullibility, blind pursuit of her "dream," fear of losing her husband and indecision on the issue of birth-control.

Adah's problems are self-engineered, fuelled and encouraged. Her decision to pursue her unbridled ambition, her "dream", "the Presence" is the first cause. She rationalises her hasty and convenient marriage to Francis by saying that all marriages are "a gamble". The second reason is that she needed a home, and for this need, immigration officials are blamed, (p. 43) yet Adah had confessed of dreaming of an early marriage to "a rich man who would allow Ma and Boy to come and stay with her" (p. 20). Most of Emecheta's Nigerian readers, however, know that a husband does not have to be excessively rich to respect such normal Nigerian customs. In Adah's words:

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! (p. 20).

The irony is that when the time comes, even without saying "Sir" and serving on bended knees, Adah tolerates more abuse and humiliation than most of those women would ever tolerate. Besides, the statement, ". . . all Ibo women did this" is an exaggeration difficult to support with sociological facts.

In her relationship with her in-laws, Adah uses guile and deceit. She admits her marriage was most unusual, in fact, "hilarious", with her illiterate mother-in-law serving as the only

witness by signing with her thumb. With no family of her own, her in-laws can now exploit her loneliness by encouraging Francis to marry her because all her money would come back to their family. The ominous circumstances of the wedding forebode the later problems., Adah admits it started on a wrong footing but fails to do anything about that. The fact that they were both under age crowns all the warnings. Her obsession with elitism and wealth is another driving force in her mistakes. Adah also admits she did not know her husband very well, but typically excuses that fault with one of her evasive generalisations:

She did not know her husband very well because, as most young African wives know, most of the decisions about their own lives had to be referred first to Big Pa, Francis's father, then to his mother, then discussed among the brothers of the family before Ada was referred to. She found all this ridiculous, the more so if the discussion involved finance. After all, she would have to pay for the plan in most cases but the decision would have been made behind her back (pp. 28—29).

The casualness with which she enters and describes this loveless marriage ironically places her on the same level with those parents whom she criticises for selling their daughters into loveless marriages. To worsen matters, she adopts the motto, "Be as cunning as a serpent but as harmless as a dove" in her dealings with her in-laws, and literally bribes her mother-in-law with her jewellery in order to obtain their permission to join Francis in Britain. It is clear to Adah from the beginning that her in-laws have always been interested in her more for her present money and future economic prospects than for her own self, yet to convince her mother-in-law to support her plan of going to England she resorts more to pretentious coaxing rather than asserting her will:

"Think of it Ma. Francis in his big American car and I in my small one, coming to visit you and Pa when you retire. You'll be the envy of all your friends. Mind you, in England I'll still work and send you money. All you have to do is to ask, and then you'll get whatever you want. All the girls will go to secondary school. I've almost finished reading for librarianship. All I have to do is to work, look after Francis and attend classes in the evening. And when I

come back, I shall earn more than double what I'm earning now" (p. 35).

Bribing her mother-in-law with her jewellery was meant to seal this agreement. Her father-in-law is no different. He sees everything about Adah in terms of her financial potentialities; that is, he would let Adah go to England only if it ultimately promised better financial rewards. But to realise her long dream of joining the "elite" by going to England, Adah ignores the implications of this exploitative situation and allows herself to be saddled with a most crippling load of responsibilities. The plan was:

He would go first, and Adah would send him twenty pounds every month; she was to save her fare and that of the children, she was to feed herself and the children whilst they were still in Lagos and pay the rent and help in paying the school fees of Francis's seven sisters (p. 27).

It is indeed a most gullible and desperate young woman who would accept such demanding terms just to be able to go to England and join a husband whom she could not even cry for on his departure. These are some of the major causes of Adah's misfortunes. They stem from character weakness rather than society.

In England she did not meet a changed Francis; just one she never knew in the first place. Their role reversal as husband and wife is simply a continuation of their home arrangement. She has always been the bread winner, and in fact felt guilty when Francis had to work at the Post Office in winter. In addition, she has always allowed Francis to dictate to her. The pattern continues in London where, despite the squalor in which they live, the intimidation of the landlord and the most inconsiderate attitude from her husband, she not only allows herself to go through a series of unplanned pregnancies but in fact uses sexual manipulation to get her wishes from her husband. But the blame is always placed on the husband whom she calls a "sex animal" and whose image of a woman she describes as "second-class human, 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" (p. 181). Adah's experiences in London witness the final and to-

tal erosion of her self-confidence which was from the start shaky, despite her unusual achievement at such a young age. Francis detected this weakness early in his wife, and while he exploited it in Nigeria before his departure to Britain he does it with reckless irresponsibility in their new, strange and clearly hostile environment where Adah's loneliness deepens as each day passes. She is not only alienated from her husband, but also from her fellow Nigerians. Despite her almost total financial support of Francis, she has never commanded any respect from him. Even when Francis had earlier on in Lagos, in collusion with his father, suggested that he alone should go to England and come back after three years with his degree fully paid for by Adah, the heroine's evasive response to such a preposterous proposition is another instance of her vague generalisations:

Francis was an African through and through. A much more civilized man would probably have found a better way of saying this to his wife. But to him, he was the male, and he was right to tell her what she was going to do. Adah, from the day of her registry marriage, had seen the romantic side of her life being shattered, like broken glass, about her. Francis had had a very expensive education at Hussey College in Warri, but his outlook on life was pure African (p. 30).

Despite the author's condescending tone in the above passage and her strange interpretation of such words as "civilised" and "African", the reader easily detects that such sermonisation is quite often an excuse for the heroine's lack of courage, fear or lack of perceptiveness. Her submissiveness quite often galls the reader and almost borders on the implausible.

She furnishes a sharp contrast to Adaku of *The Joys of Motherhood*, who, in spite of lack of formal education, has enough resourcesfulness, channels her remarkable energy into trade, and independently fights off the treatment of her husband and his relations. She defies her husband and realises her potential in a very male-oriented world. It is ironical that Emecheta uses Adaku in the above-mentioned novel to make important points about female liberation and emancipation, and yet sees nothing wrong in Adah's total acquiescence in her own oppression. Palmer summarises Adaku's achievement in these words.

When she realizes that her husband and his people have no

use for her because she has not borne a male child, she makes up her mind to leave, to concentrate on her business and be successful. And with her money she is going to take her daughters out of the conventional feminine situation and treat them as NnuEgo treats her boys; she is going to stop them going to market and send them to school, for she has a vision of the future in which daughters will be as important as sons, and no one, not even Nnaife is going to marry off her daughters before they are ready. 7

Adaku does live up to her promise both by being enormously successful in trade and by sending her children to school. She is an example of a woman, like Efuru, Idu or Agom, who defies traditional attitudes and circumstances, takes her destiny and those of her girls into her hands and demonstrates the old literary adage that character is truly fate. Mammy Aby shows similar strength of character and defiance of society. Nigerian women are noted for their drive and initiative, especially when confined within the polygamous system of marriage. It is, therefore, unusual that Adah who is endowed with a rebellious nature, as her fight to go to school demonstrates, and a solid professional talent with a comfortable financial position should allow herself to be fooled and exploited by her husband's family, and to be abused and degraded by a spoilt and selfish husband. This ironic discrepancy runs through the whole book, and it is not until she is almost physically maimed by constant beating and battering that she asserts her individuality by getting out of a marriage in which she has been just the supplier of financial and sexual comfort to her husband. But Adah is projected as a loving and devoted mother, and as her marital problems multiply and almost reduce her to a nuisance in her husband's estimation, she finds strength and consolation in her children, while Francis diminishes in her assessment to primarily the giver of children, a very successful tool for manufacturing babies.

In her final encounter with Francis, at the hospital after another demonstration of his collousness, the heroine tries to regain her pride and declares that she would one day leave such a husband. Her strength and independence come back in this passage where she openly declares her hatred for her husband and finds a home, solace and friendship with her children:

Yes I have may children. They are only babies, but babies

become people, men and women. I can switch my love to them. Leave this person. No, live with him as long as it is convenient. No longer . . . That did not mean the whole world was wrong, or that she could never start another home, now that she had her babies to share it with. She smiled at Francis, thanking God for giving her him as a tool with which it was possible to have her children. She would not harm him, because he was the father of her babies. But he was, a dangerous man to live with. Like all such men, he needed victims. Adah was not going to be a willing victim (pp. 133-4).

The last sentence in the above passage heralds a turning point in Adah's character and problems, and though occasionally she hopes the marriage will survive, she no longer acts like a willing victim but starts planning a new future for herself and her children. In addition, "she now saw this situation as a challenge, a new challenge" (p. 164) this is her period of true awakening. The Adah of the end of the novel is different from the one at the beginning. She has undergone a thorough process of brutal education from which she emerges more realistic and self-assured. The writing of *The Bride Price* is the climax of this new found freedom, independence and self-assertion. It was a feeling and conviction so strong that, despite the destruction of her first manuscript of the book by Francis, *The Bride price*, which she envisioned as her "brainchild", does materialise into Emecheta's third novel.

The character of Francis is another area of clash between art and propaganda in the novel and is certainly a unique phenomenon in Africa literature. While even old Okonkwo of Umuofia has a soft spot for his daughter, Ezimma, and a romantic one for his wife Ekwefi, Francis is portrayed without any redeeming qualities. He is arrogant in a stupid and shameless manner since he depends so desperately on his wife's financial support, and therefore is in no position to be arrogant. Despite his so-called "expensive" secondary school education, he lacks refinement both in his feelings, actions and language. He is totally self-centred, egotistical, callous and selfish. He seems to lack love both for his wife and his children, in other words, he is a failure both as a husband and a father. He is lazy, irresponsible and unfaithful to his wife, as his relationship with the baby-minder shows. As a student he is also an abysmal failure, and a nuisance to his neighbours. There is also no evidence that his selfishness and irresponsi-

bility towards his wife and children are not extended to the family he left at home in Nigeria, since there is no trace of his concern for them in form of financial support during his years in Britain. It is most unlikely that the suffering Adah would continue to support them despite her difficulties with their son. His religious sessions with his wife almost create the impression that he is either mentally unbalanced or utterly shallow in the manner of most religious fanatics. Francis is portrayed as a total villain in the order of Iago, but without the acute intelligence of his Shakespearean counterpart. He straddles a realm between the idiot and the monster. The novelist has stripped him of even basic humanity. Such an exaggerated picture is suspect, as well as implausible. Francis is the ugliest hero in African literature; he is the epitome of Emecheta's male chauvinist, but he is also much more than that, for, as Palmer says of her male characters in *The Joys of Motherhood*, . . . the author's determination to show up the males as irresponsible and unreasonable interferes somewhat with her characterization of them. Their irresponsibility is exaggerated to the point of unrealism".⁸ The portrait of Francis suffers from such an interference, so do most of Emecheta's male portraits. In fact, Chike in *The Birde Price* seems to be one of the few male characters to escape such a deformation mainly because he too, like most of the female characters in the book, is also a victim by virtue of being an "Oshu". This weakness in character portrayal contrasts sharply with the deep sensitivity, perceptiveness and sympathy with which Emecheta depicts her female characters and probes the roots of their actions. She equally demonstrates a keen understanding of the workings of the psyche of the typical African male, who has for long been favoured by tradition, and who quite often takes refuge in a glib recital of the traditional status-quo whenever his position or authority is challenged, even when he has consistently fallen short of the demands of the same tradition in his devotion and care for his wife and children. Presedent social and economic dynamics now render those claims hollow, stupid and hypocritical. Francis is the true caricature of some educated African men who believe it is their god-given right to be irresponsible, but find that it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to have their cake and eat it at the same time. The eventual breakup of his marriage is the resolution of that conflict.

The power of *Second-Class Citizen* derives mainly from the conviction, the force and the single mindedness with which Emeheta has presented the female situation and point of view in this novel. Her unapologetic commitment to that cause is unmistakable but the novel suffers to a recognisable extent by being tailored too closely to autobiographical experience, and from the degree to which objective characterisation and assessment of events and their outcome are sacrificed to social and political propaganda. Characters are denied their uniqueness and are instead forced into a mould where they become one of the victims or one of the villains. The work also suffers from widespread generalisations and conclusions about men, women and society which are clearly sociologically questionable. Given this heavy autobiographical basis and the tragic marital experiences of the author, these thematic and stylistic slips are understandable, and once more demonstrate the clash between art and propaganda in an increasingly unjust world. The abiding irony of this artistic attempt, however, is that it has not succeeded in indicting society for the sufferings of the heroine, since textually, these sufferings emerge as the result of her own human weaknesses, mistakes and miscalculations.

NOTES

1. All references to Emecheta's works are based on *In the Ditch* Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1972; *Second-Class Citizen* Fontana/Collins, Great Britain, 1974; *The Bride Price* Fontana Collins, London 1978; *The Slave Girl* Fontana/Collins, Great Britain, 1979; *Double Yoke* Ogwugwu Afor, London/Nigeria, 1982.
2. Lloyd, W. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa*, Greenwood Press, Connecticut, 1981; p. 35.
See Povey "Cyprian Ekwensi: The Novelist and the Pressure of the City" in *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature* Edited by Edgar Wright Heinemann, London, Ibadan, Nairobi, 1973. p. 93.
3. See Flora Nwapa *Efuru* Heinemann, London, Ibadan, 19.....), *Idu* Heinemann, London/Ibadan 197.....; *This is Lagos and Others Stories*.
5. Lloyd Brown, *op.cit.*, p. 37.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
7. Eldred Jones (ed.) *African Literature Today*, no. 13, Heinemann, London 1983; p. 49. All references to *The Joys of Motherhood* are taken from the Heinemann Edition, London, 1979.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 44.