

## Power And Oppression In The Novels Of Buchi Emecheta

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**Abstract:** Oppression can be defined as any cruel or unjust treatment upon anyone for a prolonged period. It can be any form of abuse which varies from individual to a large community. It is mainly a tyranny where people show their cruel, unreasonable control and power upon others. This system of oppression is sometimes institutional which affects the whole clan of people. In such cases people have a long history deeply rooted in their culture. Throughout the history we could see women especially black women are subjected to exploitation, gender discrimination, domestic violence, male chauvinism etc. Many women writers have discussed about all these abuse against women in their own society. One such women writer is Buchi Emecheta whose work revolves around women in the African culture. Her works not only investigate the aspects of women's oppression but also mounts a protest against it. Her characters fight for social justice irrespective of all the gender based obstacles..

**Keywords:** Power, oppression, liberation, survival, feminist

### 1. Introduction

Each person has got his own social identity in his society. He belongs to one of the two groups named a dominant and non-dominant group. A person of the dominant group can easily enjoy access to all the resources and can easily exercise his authority over the non-dominant group of people. Thus a person of the other group is easily subjected to all form of abuse and oppression. These people experience only limitations and disapproval in their life. This oppression regularly discriminates people and hence it is purely the exercise of power. People are subjected to sufferings and displacement, where they are forcibly separated from their clan. Oppression never comes single handed; it is a system as it is a continuous overlapped process pushing the people to hardships. This is the main reason for the black women to face heightened struggles in the American society. They have to face the struggle of racism, classism and sexism. A black woman is made to face sexuality, gender identity, racial and cultural difference. Thus all forms of oppression hit her all at once and push her to doom. Her survival is truly based on her fitness of mind and body.

Buchi Emecheta shows how her characters are abused socially and culturally in both the native land and the foreign land. She also shows the path to survival.

### 2. Power And Oppression:

Power and oppression are two sides of the same coin. They cannot be separated as one cannot function without the other. When power is exercised in a harmful way, it causes exploitation, victimization and denial of resources. These agents of oppression impose many restrictions upon the individual, community and the society. The main reason for the black people to be oppressed is the system of domination and subordination. They are also subjected to degradation since they belong to a specific social group.

Emecheta in her first novel *In the Ditch* (1972), shows her descent into the 'ditch like' life where the people are pushed to dysfunctionality. The welfare system for the black in United Kingdom has only made the people lame. In the novel, Adah is a strong, intelligent woman who yearns to live an independent life. Throughout the novel, she struggles to maintain her pride and dignity. Adah separate from her husband and struggle to survive in London with her children. She stays in the slum like mansion and struggles to rear her children alone.

### 3. Able People Are Made Disable:

Adah enters London with a dream of living an independent and a happy life with her husband. The brutal nature of Francis, and his irresponsibility made Adah separate from him. With her five children and a four month old baby, Adah searches for a decent place to stay. She is rejected by every house owner she meets because of her color. Emecheta pinpoints this in these lines, "Nearly all the notices had 'Sorry, no Coloureds' on them. Her house-hunting was made more difficult because she was black..."(The Second Class Citizen, 207). She faces discrimination in the name of color. However, she manages to stay in a mansion called Pussy Cat Mansion. But here comes the evil face of the society. To live in the mansion she has to give up her job to qualify for the membership of the ditch dwellers community. This is a big bang for Adah, as she is alone and now she has to give up her only source of income.

The society has now pushed her to inevitable acceptance of the welfare system. Thus Adah is pushed by the society to be lame, inspite of her financial situation. The burden of bringing up her children and the stressful financial condition has brought many psychological effects upon the protagonist. Here the agent of oppression such as discrimination and dysfunctionality has made Adah to become a successful woman in the white society. Buchi Emecheta has shown how the dominant white society has treated the migrated people. The first step of oppression is dependency.

All the migrant people are made to depend on the white government though they are capable and productive. This sort of abuse affects people psychologically. They have to play dumb ignoring all their dignity. However, Adah learns to survive in the mansion and finds a way to liberate herself from all the evil treatment. She emerges as more admirable, dignified and respectable women. Adah follows her own survival strategies to outsmart the social injustice.

#### **4.The Heightened Patriarchal Ideologies:**

Religion has also paved way for the oppression of women. As wives, women are made to obey and serve their husbands blindly. They have no right to go against their will or to question them. This is a sort of oppression framed by the society in the name of religion. This is evident in all the novels of Buchi. Her protagonists are not given the education they want. They are made to study just for the decent bride price. The tradition of bride price has personified women as just a material. Every girl in the African society is given a little education since she can bring a good amount for the family. This is the case of Aku-nna in the novel *The Bride Price*.

In the African society, marriage is considered as an important aspect of socialization as it connects and unites African societies. Marriage is sacred where the intermarriage between the free-born and the descendant of slave is strictly prohibited. When Aku-nna elopes with Chike, a slave descendent; the whole tribe goes against her. Women are not given the freedom to choose the man of their life. Within the traditional society women have to inhibit their self-determination and their freedom. Aku-nna exiled with her love, believing that her society will accept and support her but she could not rebel against the customs of her tribe. The whole society is made to follow the rituals, customs and tradition blindly even though they dislike it.

The power of tribal religious belief oppresses Aku-nna both physically and mentally. Throughout her life, she had the fear of rebelling against her tribe which kept on haunting her. Young girls of the tribe are made to believe that rejection of the customs, rituals and going against the taboo will lead to death. Buchi shows how the traditional values oppress women in the African society. In African society, marriage is just a contract where women have to abide by all the rules and regulations imposed by the husband and his family. In this sense, marriage cannot be related to happiness and self-development.

#### **5.Patriarchy, The Central Issue Of Society:**

Emecheta shows how the power is always handled by men. It's because the society always puts patriarchy at the center of all social organizations. Men always enjoy a lot of privileges within the family and also in the society. Their superiority is very well seen in the gender discrimination of children's education. In all the novels of Buchi she shows how girls are devoid of education or in some cases they are given only little education when compared to their sons in the family. The way how a person is treated in the family and the society mainly depends on their sex. Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* has the eagerness to go to school but her parents are not ready to send her. She is filled with despair to see her brother go to school. This eventually developed into frustration not only against her family but towards male in general.

In most of the protagonist life all sort of abuse and subjugation leads to trauma. The very attitude where boys are looked upon as privileged child and girls as "good-for-nothing" creatures shows the discrimination within the family. Emecheta, through the character of Francis, Adah's husband shows male supremacy. Francis being the head of the family and the father of five children hesitates to take care of his family. He shows his authority over Adah, through his brutal nature. For him, the only way to show his power is through beating and hurting his wife. Francis does not rule is family efficiently as a responsible father. All these disturb Adah mentally and eventually lead to their separation. Francis has misused his power over his wife and lost his privilege as a husband and a father.

#### **6.Ordeals Faced By Women In The Society:**

Women are always the victim of the society. This victimization starts from their childhood. In *The Slave Girl (1977)*, the protagonist Ogbanje Ojebeta undergoes such trauma in her childhood. Her parents die in an epidemic leaving the young girl Ojebeta under guidance of her brothers. But her brother Okolie sold the young Ojebeta to Ma Palagada, a rich woman, as he wants money to prepare for his coming-of-age ceremony. She bought her as a slave and this has turned her childhood into a prison. As a slave Ojebeta lost her very own identity and she could

not cope up with this loss. The identity of the little girl is lost forever as she is now under the control of her master. The socioeconomic problem faced by Okolie made him to sell his sister and this act disturbs him throughout the novel. This eventually made him as a fugitive slave who ran in search of a “white man’s job”.

Emecheta also shows that women instead of being a active participant in the upcoming of their community, exploits and treat them as marginalized. Women face oppression not only from men but also from their own sex. Victoria, the daughter of Ma Palagada keeps treating Ojebeta and many other girls in an abusive way. She seeks pleasure in disgracing them. Her existence depends on the exploitation of her fellow sex. Power is the main reason behind the idea of oppression. Black women have to thrive this situation with a hope in their heart. Women are the creators of sufferings in the Ojebeta’s life. Here comes the racial discrimination between the same sexes.

Emecheta in *The Slave Girl* shows that the center of Power can move from men to women. The wrong use of power leads to the birth of oppression which eventually controls one’s life. In this novel Emecheta also shows that men are incapable of expressing parental love. This is why Okolie went to the extent of selling his own sister. He had no love and affection towards her. Similarly Francis also neither had any parental love towards his children nor for his wife. This lack of affection from the family leads to trauma and their life is filled with hopelessness.

### **7.Women’s Empowerment:**

The victimization of women from the early childhood makes them feel as second sexes who are good for nothing. This very thought at the early stage seems to be the first hindrance for their self development. This remains as a stumbling stone for women to mingle with the society. In every African society the sole purpose of women’s birth is to get married and beget a male child. A girl child is destined to be obedient and remain in a subordinate position throughout her life. Every young girl’s life has got tinge o regret and anguish against men and the society. The empowerment of women has to begin from home where sons and daughters have to be looked upon as equal gender.

Gender equality must begin from the family. It is the society which created the stereotypes for women. Tradition plays a major role in being an obstacle for women’s empowerment. Emecheta through her male and female characters shows the relationship between men and women. The society encourages men to remain in the superior position and pushes women to the subordinate level. The protagonist of Emecheta shows, how this difference can be demolished and turn into more respectable and humanistic.

### **8.The Traumatic Childhood:**

The development of children totally depends on their experiences and the situations they come across in their life. In this sense Adah, Aku-nna and Ojebeta all had a bitter experience of their childhood. In *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah was a victim of child labour. She worked like a household drudge around the house and fields.

“One might think ... that Africans treated their children very badly. To Adah’s people and to Adah herself, this was not so at all, it was the custom. Children especially girls were taught to be very useful very early in life, and this has its advantages.”

Every day Adah was given the duty to fill the mighty drum with water. This mighty drum was used as the container by her family. She wakes early by four thirty to fill the drum which is a real hard work. Adah makes nearly ten to twelve trips to the public pump to fill the mighty drum. Though it is a hard work, she must obey and complete it without questioning. This was the childhood experiences of many African girl children which was considered normal in a day to day life.

Children are forcibly made to do things even if they don’t want to do it. They are devoid of the space and time they need in their childhood. This is a form of abuse which prevents the young minds from advancement. In every African house, a girl child is also the maid of the family. They are not given the education they wish for. This shows the patriarchal nature of the Igbo society. Girls are not only bonded to men but are also a prey to them.

The situation gets worse when the head of the family dies. When the father dies in a family, the members of the family are left alone. The children are fatherless and their future is at stake since they lost the pillar of their family. In Igbo society, after the loss of the husband, the center moves to his brother. The death of the husband is followed by the custom of transferring the widow to her husband’s brother. The whole family along with the children is now under the control of their own uncle. This practice of widow inheritance has got a severe psychological effect on women and he children.

The difficulty to accept a new person as a father, immediately after their father’s loss, affects them emotionally. This shows how women are regarded as a mere toy and transferred from one hand to another with no regard to their feelings. This practice of transferring the widow has got a devastating effect on the children. This

was the situation of Aku-nna and her brother Nna-nnda. After the demise of her husband, Aku-nna's mother Ma Blackie marries Okonkwo, the uncle of Aku-nna and moves along with him. Aku-nna had no control over the situation and has to accept it blindly. The girls in the family are no less than a slave.

### 9. Sexual Exploitation:

In African society, children are not only made to work like a household drudge, but also sexually exploited. Many young girls are mentally and sexually exploited by men. In *Double Yoke*, Emecheta brings to light the story of young girl Nko and her Professor Ikot. Nko lives in modern environment when compared to the other protagonist of Emecheta. This does not mean she is free from the patriarchal clutches. Nko is caught between herself and her Professor Ikot who keeps abusing her sexually. Emecheta shows that modern environment does not change anything in women's life. Professor Ikot was a man who offers to help Nko only if she satisfies him sexually. Though the Professor is aware that Nko is already engaged to Ete Kamba, he blackmails her. Nko accepts the offer though she rebels it personally. The sexual interaction between them was devoid of love and she remained like a wooden doll until he quenched his sexual thirst.

Professor's Ikot again shows his lack of responsibility and lack of ethics as a teacher. He manipulates Nko to satisfy his sexual desires. It is Ikot who won and this shows how women are exploited in every field. Women's subjugation is omnipresent despite of the environment. Environment and education has nothing to do with this attitude. Be it a traditional or a modern society men are the oppressors and women are oppressed. Moreover, education has nothing to do with the injustice bestowed on women. There are no boundaries for such abuse which can protect women from being exploited.

These are the hurdles for the African women's individual development. A Black woman cannot advance in her life peacefully like the White woman. They are the victims of racism, classism and gender discrimination. Many incidents from her childhood, moving to adulthood and latter in the motherhood, she comes across a lot of disgrace, abuse and exploitation that always remains as a scar for her. Thus each stage of her life is directly proportional to the form of constraints she must go through.

This shows how men take advantage of the biological superiority which is also supported by the tradition. The Igbo tradition encourages polygamy. The society also never cares when the master sleeps with his slave. Since they are supported by tradition, many young girls are sexually exploited by their slave masters.

### 10. The Issue Of Marriage:

Along with the different form of oppression, the little girls are also pushed to the pressure of marriage. In the traditional African society, the girls rarely have the freedom to deal with their marriage. They cannot choose the partner of their choice and their marriage will just remain as a contract devoid of love and affection. In the name of bride price the girls are looked upon as mere object which will fetch them a good fortune at the time of marriage. This clearly shows the place the money holds in the minds of people. Even after the marriage the agents of oppression continue to haunt women. Women are expected to give birth to male children. The more the sons, the higher the status of women, in the society.

The other issue of marriage is women lack self expression. Men's decision in the family remains sacred, which cannot be doubted and questioned. Females don't dare to go against the customs and they also don't dare to question the men's quest for power. In Adah's life, her marriage lead her to a dingy ditch. The children were left without the father. Adah has experienced only brutal violence from her husband. Latter Adah becomes the victim of triple oppression : race, class and sex. In *The Bride price*, the issue of caste system is linked with marriage. The protagonist Aku-nna is the victim of love and tradition. A free born can never marry a descendent of slave and if she against it, she has to pay for it.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego falls as a victim when she fails to bear children in her marriage with Amatokwu. Emecheta concentrates on the issue of bareness and also the pressure of having male children. All these create a psychological trauma for Nnu Ego. The people's mind in the Igbo society is filled with manhood and it is evident in Marie Umeh's argument in "*Procreation Not Recreation: Decoding Maman in Buchi Emecheta's The Joys Of Motherhood*"

" [the] glory of a woman is a man; a woman without a son is a failure; marriage is for the production of male heirs to continue the husband's lineage; and a complete mother is a mother of healthy sons."

This shows how many African people consider bareness as a plague. This also explains the need of male child in the family. Every girl child in the family is made to understand that the sole purpose of their life is to get married and give birth to sons. The society has made women to think that in order to be a good wife; a woman must be a good mother.

This is not applicable for men, as husbands keep taking new wives and lovers every year. Nnu Ego's marriage with Amatokwu dissolves as he brings new wife to home. He says,

"What do you want me to do?" Amatokwu asked. —I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you do not appeal to me any more". (The Joys of Motherhood, 32)

Later Nnu Ego also marries Nnaife and gives birth to a male child. As her family grows, she emerged as a main source of income for her family. She was a perfect mother sacrificing herself to serve for her children. She became the victim of her family. Her children went to seek their own destiny and Nnu Ego was left alone in her old age. Her joys and aspirations on motherhood were all utopia and she was left to die on road.

### 11.The Quest For Liberation:

Many modern African Literature shows that, women have succeeded in life through perseverance and entrepreneurship. In all postcolonial text, illiteracy has got its own impact in the development of women. Most of the African girls are devoid of education because of the social stigma and also poverty. The children were deprived of attaining their basic rights and were forced into domesticity. Buchi Emecheta has made her female protagonist literate and also illiterate. It is education which helps women to gain confidence and empower herself. This was evident in Adah's life. Initially she was prevented from going to school as she is a girl and her parents were ready to send her brother to complete his schoolings. This did not stop Adah, she managed to complete her school education in a Christian missionary after her father dies. This education, later helps Adah to take an important decision in her life.

She was able to come out of Francis, as he was abusive. She even hits him back to show her resistance,

"She did not know where she got her courage from, but she was beginning to hit him back, even biting him when need be. If that was the language he wanted, well, she would use it." (The second Class Citizen, 285.)

Her education helps her to find a job in the library. The expense which she receives helps her to look after her children and take care of them. Adah also pursues her dream of becoming a writer and succeeds in life. Adah was able to take all the big decisions in life without any hesitation. Education gave her the confidence to take care of her family as a single parent in the alienated society.

In Nnu Ego's case it was entirely the opposite. Her illiteracy made her to confine herself within her society and be a traditional wife and a mother. She is blinded by the joy as a mother and sacrifices herself for the sake of her children. Nnu Ego does not dare to change her living conditions. She accepts the scenario as it is and goes by it. She was so weak physically, as she never cared for herself. Her illiteracy made her to accept the stereotypes enforced on them by the masculine society. She played the role of good mother in order to be a good wife. Her illiteracy has made her ignorant and she was left to pass her olden days alone. Her illiteracy has paved way for her entrapment.

### 12.Conclusion:

Emecheta shows how the domestic chores, female stereotyping, sexual exploitation, bareness, widow inheritance and polygamy have all turned as violence against women. Men enforce their power and authority by pushing women to the secondary position. This is a strategy which men use to continue holding their power. This gender based issues have become one of the major issues of African women's writings. Emecheta's protagonist realizes that social injustice prevents them from attaining their identity and freedom. Women have to create their own path to live a better life which leads to emancipation.

In Adah's life education and emigration help her to attain the success she wished for in her life. Similarly Nko also can be called a New Woman as she managed to pursue her studies by using her body. Women's freedom is stifled by certain social violence such as early marriage, rape, virginity, transition from tradition to modernity. Almost all social injustice targets women subjugation and they are particularly victimized by the patriarchal society. Apart from this, they are the victims of objectification which hinders their development.

Many writers have begun to fight against racial and gender discrimination. A person cannot be subjugated in the name of gender and particularly women cannot be devoid of equal rights and access in the name of gender. Every Black woman has begun to show resistance against all the social injustice and oppression. They have started to find the way to liberate them physically and mentally. Women began to follow their survival strategy to attain emancipation. They started facing the problems boldly instead of accepting or escaping from it. Their boldness and perseverance lead to their emancipation.

Many Africans began to gain knowledge through literacy not only for their personal development, but also to regain their cultural identity. Emecheta's female characters are shaped to face the situation and not to withdraw from the odd times. Nko was the victim of moral and physical violence. But Nko blindly accepts it to get her degrees. Emecheta also shows how the society has been corrupted by men. Her characters prove that women are capable of rising from their ashes. They learn to survive by understanding the situation and take actions accordingly.

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