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Blackness Matters: The Problematic of Race in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*

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'Race' problem is one of the prominent rudiments in Emecheta's fiction. Her characters face racism in the diasporic location/home, but they, especially the female characters, cope with it by establishing their 'blackness' and 'difference'. They (female characters) do not accept being encumbered by the ideology of the superiority of the 'white' race. Emecheta searches for syncretic alternatives, which are conspicuous in the form of a fluid, deconstructed racial consciousness in her novels. According to Mitchell, in the age of diaspora the liminal spaces of hybridity emerge as resistant and subversive forces against the essentialist discourses. "These liminal spaces are theorized as important positions in the tactical war against dominant hegemonies. In particular, they are conceptualized as key sites of intervention in narratives of race and nation . . ." (Mitchell 533). Paul Gilroy's conception of the 'Black Atlantic,' with its turn to diaspora, is "a specially strategic understanding of racialized culture simultaneously" (Chariandy). Moreover, according to Jordan, 'Black' became a popular term of "identity politics in 1970s Britain" (12) and with Stuart Hall's involvement in the Black British art of the 1980s and 1990s, it was employed to address the "questions of race, identity, history/memory and cultural hybridity" (Jordan 13).

The heroine of *Second-Class Citizen*, Adah, before her migration to England, is not aware of the harsh reality of racial discrimination in the country of white people. She comes to have a weird and shocking experience of racial discrimination. Emecheta narrates: "The whites she saw . . . looked remote, happy in an aloof way, but determined to keep their distance" (36). Muoneke remarks that migrants often construct illusions and expectations about their settlement in the diaspora location. Although some of them succeed in making it true, but ". . . other forms of hardship also exist in the region of their destination, for example, racism, strange cultural environment, discrimination based on accent, communication skills, gender, age and religion" (Muoneke 53).

Adah finds Francis, her husband, quite changed in his attitude when she meets him in London. Nevertheless, she has to cope with the circumstances and lead a life of struggle. Francis reveals the fact of the 'ghettoization' of black people in the UK. He expresses a general predicament of accommodation for blacks in London, referring to the racial segregation, which keeps all the Oriental people 'peripherized' from mainstream habitation. Wieviorka suggests that in the recent decades a 'cultural' or 'differentialist' racism has evolved in diasporic locations, which aims ". . . to keep the other at a distance, to segregate him or her, to get rid of him or her, and in more extreme cases, to expel or to destroy him or her" (71).

The fact of 'being black' is a sense of inferiority complex for Francis; it makes him a stagnant figure. He also points to the 'homogenization' of ethnic and cultural differences of the people from the Orient. The racist ideology of the West brings all the Orientalized people to the periphery of white people's habitation in the UK. Francis speaks to Adah:

> You see, accommodation is very short in London, especially for black people with children. Everybody is coming to London. The West Indians, the Pakistanis and even the Indians, so that African students are usually grouped together with them. We are all blacks, all coloureds, and the only houses we can get are horrors . . . . (Emecheta 38)

Adah comes to learn from Francis that in the English society blacks are classless human beings. They are homogenized as 'second-class citizens'. In London, she cannot maintain the high standard of living, which she used to do in Lagos. Francis insinuates: ". . . the day you land in England, you are a second-class citizen. So you can't discriminate against your own people, because we are all second-class". He has adapted himself to the 'racialized', second-class position of blacks in London. "What worried her [Adah] most was the description "second-class". Francis had become so conditioned by this phrase that he was not only living up to it but enjoying it, too" (Emecheta 39, 40). For him, everything English is superior to the African. Anthias comments:

> As an enabling device the 'race' paradigm delivers concerns with the negative categorisation of population groups, and their structural disadvantages. However, the social positioning of these groups is often not related to their migration and settlement trajectories. Their location and constitution within their country of origin (as class subjects, for example) has been seriously under-explored. (559)

Initially, Adah is unable to befriend the white people at her workplace, because their choices, motives and way of life are different. Husain remarks in this context: "Not only do the officials let Adah down when she might reasonably have expected assistance, but she also lacks the secondary recourse to a social circle with which to commiserate or share advice on a more informal basis" (11). Emecheta writes that they ". . . made Adah feel out of place, so she never really became too familiar with them. They made her feel inferior somehow always . . ." (44). On the exhortation of his jealous neighbors, Francis suggests to send the children to some foster-mother. The black people confirmed only that ". . . the foster mother was white. The concept of "whiteness" could cover a multitude of sins" (Emecheta 46). He argues that the children can avail to learn the English language if they are sent to some white foster-mother. But, initially, Adah objects to this foster-mothering of her children. She thinks she should not be involved in the rat race of the black people living in Britain. Nevertheless, it is not such an easy task to find a white foster-mother in the UK. "Significantly, Emecheta demonstrates the patent lack of solidarity between black and white women in her depiction of her protagonist's attempts to obtain childcare" (Husain 10).

Adah seeks to challenge the European discourse of racial superiority. She begins to cherish an ambition to be a first-class citizen like the white people and to have an equal human status. She is not affected by Francis' inferiority complex. Blackness is synonymous with inferiority for Francis. She "knew that his blackness, his feeling of blackness, was firmly established his mind. She knew that there was discrimination all over the place, but Francis's mind was a fertile ground in which such attitudes could grow and thrive" (Emecheta 58). Fanon remarks on such proclivity for inferiority complex:

> Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation. . . . He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (18)

The black race possesses an equal human status in Adah's view. In the wake of her arrival in England, she is conscious of the hurdles she has to face as a black Nigerian woman. She also faces the jealousy of other black people, from different ethnicities and nationalities, living in Ashdown Street. But she is adamant to face all the mountainous quandaries. She knows that a person's 'race' is not any parameter to gauge his/her goodness or badness. She remonstrates with the children's officer about Trudy, the foster-mother, who maltreats her children. Trudy manifests compunction for her segregationist misdeed. "But Adah could not stop thinking about her discovery that the whites were just as fallible as everyone else. There were bad whites and good whites, just as there were bad blacks and good blacks! Why, then did they claim to be superior?" (Emecheta 53). Husain comments: "The encounter with Trudy highlights the differential treatment women receive from agents of the British welfare state on the basis of race" (11).

Adah is not unaware of the history of Orientalist tendency of the European imperialism. She aims to expose the hegemonic effect of colonialism on the colonized subjects. Europeans imposed their own language on the native subjects. The subjects did not challenge it, rather they acquiesced in their Orientalising enterprise. Power was centered with the English language: "This was due to the fact that Nigeria was ruled for so long a time by the English. An intelligent man was judged by the way he spoke English. But it did not matter whether the English could speak the languages of the people they ruled" (Emecheta 54). Adah ruminates over her experience that the notion of discrimination, to a great extent, sprouts from the people of her own race. Being of different ethnicities, they develop feelings of prejudice and discrimination against one another. Owing to this reason she has to leave the house in Ashdown Street. She comes to experience the acuteness of racial discrimination when she starts searching for another accommodation. It stupefies her and strikes her consciousness; affects her psychologically.

Adah is different from other Africans because she does not acquiesce in inferiority as a permanent 'subject'. She is an enlightened, modern Nigerian woman. She "did not yet believe that wholly. . . . The result was that she started to act in the way expected of her because she was still new in England, but after a while, she was not going to accept it from anyone. She was going to regard herself as the equal of any white". She adopts a submissive (racially inferior) role as she needs to. But the rejection she receives at Hawley Street from a white old lady shatters her soul. Her family is not suitable for the dilapidated house of the white lady just ". . . because they were black". "The shock [is] one she would never forget" (Emecheta 71, 78, 78). It is painfully ironic.

Emecheta explores the perspective of 'miscegenation' of the Nigerians (before independence), who came to England for a degree but "failed to make a foothold", with the white women of failed marriages. It was a kind of resistance to the colonial power. They sought consolation in the fact ". . . that, after all, they were married to white women" (Emecheta 80, 81). It challenged the colonial ideology of racial purity and difference, hence it was a sheer 'ambivalence' of the colonial power. "Since the maintenance of the absolute difference between Europeans and others, colonizers and colonized, was crucial to military and administrative control, miscegenation raised the constant spectre of ideological (and sometimes external) destabilization of imperial power" (Ashcroft et al. 127). A house "full of half-caste children" (Emecheta 91) was a celebration of their (Nigerians') win over the white. Mr. Noble is such an example. Mr. Noble deploys a 'carnivalesque' (Bakhtin) ruse to evict the old white ladies from his house. With such carnivalesque response to the authority (white people), Mr. Noble becomes a resistant agency. He intimidates the imperial power and renders it 'ambivalent', "oppos[ing] the official culture of the ruling classes" (Bakhtin 473). Adah's exposure of the hypocritical veneer of colour discrimination, practiced by the white people, is a trenchant way to resist racism. She argues with Francis that, ". . . Jesus was an Arab. . . . So to the English, Jesus is coloured. All the pictures show him with the type of pale colour. . . . these people worship a coloured man and yet refuse to take a coloured family into their home?" (Emecheta 78).

Adah expresses that the English people are very reclusive and of covert nature. They wear masquerades of artificiality over their countenances. Francis starts working as a postman and describes his experience to Adah that for the English people, a dog is more valuable than a black man. ". . . they love their dogs . . . so much so that they would rather let the dogs butcher a black man, than let the black man kill the dog" (Emecheta 128). Adah feels sympathy and concern for Francis, but she impugns its authenticity. However, she shudders at the thought of Francis being butchered by the English dogs ". . . and their owners would be standing there laughing and saying "poor nigger"!". She gets very anxious and panicked, when her son, Vicky's ear gets infected, "because they were blacks and because Vicky was only a baby . . ." (Emecheta 128, 136), so no doctor would turn up for his treatment. Bedana and Laishram remark:

> Both Francis and Adah face racism in many situations such as in hiring their baby-sitter, in renting an apartment, in giving job interviews etc. The height of racism becomes unbearable when Adah finds that her sick son Vicky is being taken to a hospital named "Royal Free" hospital. The name of the hospital is ironic since it appears that the treatment they are going to give is "royal" and still "free" of charge. Adah doesn't swallow this and doubts about the hospital's neglected treatment . . . . (34).

Adah's colleague, Bill, a handsome Canadian, spurs on her racial consciousness and self-esteem about 'blackness'. It whets her interest in African writers, her own 'self' and the beauty of her own race. Bill, who abhors the English for their chauvinism, exalts Adah's view about 'blackness'. It is a contradictory fact that she comes to 'know' about her own 'self' through a white man, not her own people in England. Emecheta writes:

> Adah did not know any black writers apart from the few Nigerian ones, like Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa. . . . Bill . . . told her what a shame it was that an intelligent black girl like her should know so little about her own black people. Adah thought about it and realised that Bill was right. . . . It was through Bill that Adah knew of James Baldwin. She came to believe, through reading Baldwin, that black was beautiful. (152)

The fact that Adah's utopic dream of the UK is shattered does not leave her hopeless about her ambition – to establish herself as a Black-British writer in the multicultural and (ideologically) cosmopolitan Britain. Her fight against the weapons of racism and patriarchy begets her equal human status in the diaspora space. She wishes for a cosmopolitan world without racial and gender hierarchies, where cultural identities can play in a free space. Adah's writing, for her, is a metaphor of "an intellectual journey across the Atlantic" (Gilroy 4). It may become a narrative of her symbolic as well as geographical journey. Her colleagues' anti-essentialist attitude renders her boundaries porous. By virtue of her powerful resistance and dissidence, Adah firmly establishes that her blackness matters substantially in a country of white people.

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