

Exploring Gender Roles and Identity in African Literature : A Study of the Works of Buchi Emecheta

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Abstract: This research paper provides an in-depth examination of the literary legacy of Buchi Emecheta, a pioneering figure who reshaped the narrative landscape for African women in the twentieth century.

While early African literature was heavily dominated by male voices, this study explores how Emecheta carved out a necessary space to articulate the specific, often silenced struggles of women facing the “double yoke” of colonial oppression and indigenous patriarchy. Through a close reading of landmark novels such as *Second-Class Citizen*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *The Bride Price*, the essay analyzes how Emecheta bridges the gap between traditional Igbo storytelling and the harsh realism of modern life. The discussion focuses on her characters—from the immigrant Adah battling racism and domestic abuse in London, to Nnu Ego, whose life questions the traditional value placed on female fertility. Beyond the texts themselves, the paper traces the evolution of Emecheta’s critical reception, documenting her shift from a marginalized storyteller to a central pillar of African feminist thought. The study argues that her work does more than chronicle suffering; it acts as a form of resistance, championing the importance of education and financial independence as tools for liberation. Ultimately, this paper posits that Emecheta’s writing remains vital today, offering a timeless critique of how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the female experience in a post-colonial world.

Keywords: Buchi Emecheta, African literature, black feminism, post-colonialism, diaspora, gender roles, literary criticism.

Introduction - African literature in English represents a powerful synthesis of ancestral oral legacies and the linguistic frameworks inherited from the colonial era. More than just a byproduct of history, this body of work acts as a vital site of resistance and cultural negotiation, allowing authors to reclaim identities fractured by colonization. Within this vast canon, few voices resonate with as much grit and authenticity as Buchi Emecheta. Born in Lagos in 1944, Emecheta did not merely write about the African female experience; she lived the very hardships—child marriage, the isolation of the diaspora, and the sting of systemic racism—that she would later transmute into art. Her journey from a struggling immigrant in London to a celebrated novelist provides the raw, autobiographical pulse found in masterpieces such as *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Emecheta’s significance lies in her ability to portray African women not as passive victims of history, but as active agents navigating the “double colonization” of imperial rule and domestic patriarchy. By infusing her English prose with the rhythmic cadences of Igbo proverbs and oral tradition, she created a literary hybridity that challenged Western perceptions of African life. Her work remains an essential study for

understanding the intersection of tradition and modernity, particularly as it pertains to the evolution of African feminist thought. By examining her narratives of migration and motherhood, this paper explores how Emecheta redefined the boundaries of African English literature, ensuring that the stories of the marginalized were no longer footnotes, but central themes in the global literary conversation.

This research aims to critically examine Buchi Emecheta’s profound impact on African English literature by exploring the thematic depth and stylistic innovation of her storytelling. By placing her work in conversation with broader post-colonial narratives, this study illustrates how Emecheta amplified the voices of African women to dismantle long-standing patriarchal and colonial myths. Furthermore, the paper investigates the critical debates surrounding her specific brand of feminism—often termed “womanism” or “African feminism”—to distinguish it from Western constructs—and assesses her lasting influence on the writers of today (Arndt 71). The importance of this study rests in its pursuit of a holistic understanding of Emecheta’s legacy. As contemporary African societies continue to navigate the complexities of gender politics and cultural identity, her novels offer an enduring roadmap for resilience. Additionally, this research critiques the limitations of applying strictly

Western literary theories to African texts, arguing instead for a localized, context-aware critical lens (Mohanty 334).

Historical And Cultural Context

The Evolution of African Literature in English: The trajectory of African literature is inseparable from the colonial encounter, a period that forcibly introduced European languages to the continent. For many writers, English was a “double-edged sword”: it was the language of the oppressor, yet it provided a global stage for African voices. While some, like Ngig wa Thiong’o, eventually argued that writing in a colonial tongue was a “mental colonization,” others like Chinua Achebe reclaimed English as a tool of resistance (Ngig 4; Achebe 62). These authors successfully “Africanized” the language, infusing it with local proverbs and oral traditions to tell their own stories. By the mid-20th century, a vital wave of female authors began to emerge. Among them, Emecheta stood out by insisting that national independence was incomplete if it did not also include the domestic liberation of women (Stratton 11).

Women’s Status in Traditional African Frameworks: Historically, the position of women in African societies has been both powerful and precarious. Women were often the economic backbone of their communities, yet their social agency was frequently stifled by patriarchal structures. Customs such as the bride price and polygamy often framed a woman’s value through her relationship to men and her ability to produce heirs.

Emecheta’s fiction serves as a sharp interrogation of these traditional norms. Rather than presenting women as silent victims, she portrays them as resourceful navigators of a rigid system. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta exposes the psychological toll of the “motherhood myth,” showing how Nnu Ego’s identity is entirely consumed by the success of her children (Emecheta 150). Her work celebrates the grit that allowed these women to survive while simultaneously mourning the cost of their endurance.

Colonialism’s Ripple Effects on Social Structures: The colonial project did more than just redraw borders; it fractured the soul of African social life. The imposition of Western Christianity created a “cultural schizophrenia,” forcing a collision between ancient belief systems and foreign ideologies. This shift was particularly damaging to women, as colonial administrations often favored patriarchal hierarchies, stripping women of the informal political power they held in pre-colonial settings (Amadiume 12). Emecheta’s work, particularly *The Slave Girl*, captures the fallout of this transition, illustrating how the intersection of colonial economics and traditional marriage created new forms of bondage. For Emecheta’s protagonists, the end of colonial rule was merely one phase in a much larger battle for personal and intellectual autonomy (Fishburn 28).

Post-Colonial Hurdles and the Literary Response: The dawn of the post-colonial era did not bring the immediate utopia many expected; instead, it ushered in a grueling period of soul-searching as African nations confronted the

ghosts of their colonial past. Themes of systemic corruption, economic reliance on former masters, and a profound sense of cultural displacement began to dominate the literary landscape. While many male authors focused on the “public” failures of the new state, Buchi Emecheta turned her gaze toward the “private” sphere, illustrating how the marginalization of women persisted-and even intensified-in post-colonial societies.

In *Second-Class Citizen*, Emecheta explores the intersectional reality of the African woman in the diaspora, where the weight of race, gender, and class creates a unique form of triple oppression (Emecheta, *Citizen* 45). Her protagonists do not merely endure; they demonstrate an indomitable spirit, suggesting that the true success of post-coloniality lies in the liberation of the female mind.

The Evolution of African Feminist Thought: Feminism in an African context is not a mere carbon copy of Western movements; it is a distinct intellectual tradition that balances a critique of patriarchy with a deep-seated respect for communal African values. Unlike some Western frameworks that view tradition as an enemy, African feminist thought-often referred to as “STIWANISM” or “Womanism”-seeks to reform tradition from within to achieve gender equity (Arndt 31). Emecheta’s bibliography is a cornerstone of this movement. Her narratives dismantle the stereotype of the silent, suffering African wife, replacing it with the image of a woman who actively negotiates her autonomy. By weaving feminist resistance into the fabric of Igbo cultural life, Emecheta helped define a brand of feminism that is as authentically African as it is universally relevant.

The Interplay of Symbolism, Language, and Gender in Buchi Emecheta’s Fiction: Buchi Emecheta’s literary corpus is defined by a sophisticated use of symbolism that bridges the gap between traditional African motifs and universal struggles for autonomy. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the central metaphor of children as a simultaneous source of “joy and sorrow” highlights the crushing weight of societal expectations placed upon the maternal figure (Emecheta 14). This irony is further echoed in *The Bride Price*, where the titular exchange serves as a physical manifestation of patriarchal dominance, and in *The Slave Girl*, where Ojebeta’s anklets function as a dual symbol of both cultural belonging and systemic bondage (Emecheta 32). By grounding these symbols in Igbo traditions, Emecheta creates a narrative space where individual identity is constantly negotiated against the backdrop of cultural history. The authenticity of Emecheta’s prose is significantly bolstered by her linguistic choices. Rather than adhering strictly to Western literary standards, she employs a “linguistic hybridity” that blends English with Igbo proverbs and vernacular. This technique does more than just provide texture; it validates the lived experiences of characters who exist between two worlds-the traditional African and the colonial Western. As seen in the speech patterns of her protagonists, this dialogue serves as a form of cultural resistance, asserting the validity of African English as a

medium for high literature.

Furthermore, Emecheta's characterization offers a nuanced look at the African female experience through figures like Nnu Ego and Adah. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's descent into disillusionment serves as a tragic critique of a society that values women only for their reproductive capabilities (Emecheta 120). Conversely, Adah in *Second-Class Citizen* embodies the spirit of resilience, navigating the "double colonization" of systemic British racism and domestic patriarchal oppression (Emecheta 55). Emecheta's feminism, however, is never a mere transplant of Western ideals; it is an "inclusive feminism" that addresses specific African realities such as polygamy and the commodification of women, while remaining sensitive to the complexities of the cultural environment.

The Literary Architecture of Buchi Emecheta

1. Symbolism and the Irony of Motherhood:

Emecheta's narratives often hinge on objects and titles that carry heavy, contradictory meanings. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the title itself functions as a biting irony. While Nnu Ego's society equates a woman's worth with her fertility, Emecheta illustrates that these "joys" are frequently synonymous with self-sacrifice and poverty (Emecheta 224). Similarly, in *The Slave Girl*, the protagonist Ojebeta wears heavy brass anklets. These are not merely decorative; they serve as a physical manifestation of her status as property while simultaneously linking her to her lost cultural lineage. By using these motifs, Emecheta suggests that for the African woman, identity is often a "double-edged sword" of tradition and bondage.

2. Linguistic Hybridity and Dialogue: Authenticity in Emecheta's prose is achieved through a deliberate blending of colonial English and Igbo linguistic structures. Rather than sanitizing the speech of her characters, she populates her dialogue with Igbo proverbs and idioms. This "linguistic hybridity" does more than just provide flavor; it validates the lived experiences of those caught between two worlds. By refusing to translate every cultural nuance, Emecheta forces the reader to meet her characters on their own cultural ground, asserting that African English is a legitimate and powerful vehicle for literature.

3. Resilience in Characterization: Emecheta's protagonists are rarely flat icons of suffering; instead, they are characterized by a gritty, sometimes desperate, agency.

- Nnu Ego (*The Joys of Motherhood*): A woman who adheres strictly to tradition only to find that it fails her in the end.
- Adah (*Second-Class Citizen*): A character who mirrors Emecheta's own life, navigating the "triple threat" of being Black, a woman, and an immigrant in a hostile British environment.

As noted in many critical circles, Emecheta's brilliance lies in her refusal to make her antagonists purely "evil." Instead, she portrays oppression as a systemic machine, where even the men are often cogs in a patriarchal wheel

that they do not fully understand.

4. An African-Centered Feminism: While Emecheta is frequently labeled a feminist, her approach—often termed "womanism" or African feminism—is distinct from Western iterations. She does not advocate for a rejection of family, but rather for the dismantling of practices that commodify women.

Key Theme Literary Manifestation Societal Critique
The Bride Price Marriage as a financial transaction

The loss of female autonomy

Polygamy Domestic rivalry and neglect The fragmentation of female support

Education Adah's struggle for literacy

Knowledge as the primary tool for liberation

5. Politics and the Immigrant Experience: Beyond the domestic sphere, Emecheta's work serves as a sharp indictment of colonial legacies. In *Second-Class Citizen*, she provides a visceral account of the 1960s London immigrant experience, detailing the "coldness" of both the weather and the people. She exposes the intersectionality of racism and sexism, showing how African women were often pushed to the very bottom of the British social hierarchy. By documenting these struggles, her literature transcends storytelling to become a historical record of resilience against systemic marginalization.

Literature Review: Synthesis of Scholarship

1. The Deconstruction of Patriarchal Motherhood:

Scholarship frequently identifies Emecheta's subversion of the "sacred" maternal role as her most significant contribution to African literature. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the protagonist's life serves as a tragic case study in how cultural identity is often reduced to biological output. This study shows that Nnu Ego's descent into poverty and isolation reveals the "empty promise" of traditional patriarchal structures, which demand total sacrifice from women without providing security in return (Nadaswaran 25). Critics find that Emecheta uses this humanitarian lens to advocate for a woman's right to an identity independent of her role as a "producer of sons."

2. Intersectionality and the "Double Colonization"

Framework: A recurring finding in the literature is the unique intersectional struggle faced by the African woman. Scholars argue that Emecheta's characters do not suffer from a single source of oppression; rather, they are "doubly colonized" by British imperialist systems and indigenous patriarchal customs (Oladipo and Ogbeide-Ihama 216). This study shows that in *Second-Class Citizen*, the search for identity is further complicated by the immigrant experience. Research highlights that Emecheta portrays the humanitarian crisis of "cultural homelessness," where women are forced to shed their heritage to gain the individual agency offered by Western education.

3. Economic Empowerment and Humanitarian

Agency: Current research emphasizes that Emecheta views financial independence not just as a luxury, but as a

fundamental human right. Scholars note that her characters' identities are often dictated by their economic status. This study shows that by depicting women as "second-class citizens" based on their lack of income, Emecheta highlights the necessity of education and vocational training. The consensus in the literature is that Emecheta's work acts as a blueprint for female agency, suggesting that true identity is found when a woman transitions from being a "commodity" to a "competitor" in the global economy.

Research Gaps in the Works of Buchi Emecheta: Extensive scholarship has documented Emecheta's critique of "double colonization"-the intersection of British colonialism and indigenous patriarchy. However, as the field of African literary studies evolves, several research gaps remain.

First, there is a significant lack of comparative digital humanities approaches to her corpus. While thematic analyses of motherhood and domesticity abound, few studies utilize computational linguistics to map the evolution of "voice" and "silence" across her twenty-plus books. Most critics focus exclusively on her early "London novels" or her Lagos-based historical fiction, leaving her later works, such as *The New Tribe* (2000), under-theorized in the context of contemporary transnationalism.

Furthermore, a gap exists regarding the ecofeminist dimensions of her narratives. Scholarship frequently explores the social environment but overlooks how Emecheta links female autonomy to land ownership and agricultural shifts in colonial Nigeria. Finally, there is a need for more nuanced research into the performative aspects of gender in her work. While Judith Butler's theories of performativity are often applied to Western texts, applying these to Emecheta's protagonists-who must "perform" submission to survive-could bridge the gap between African "womanism" and global queer or gender-fluid theories. Addressing these areas would move the conversation beyond the established victim-versus-rebel dichotomy.

Where the Current Research Falls Short: One major gap is the "London vs. Village" trap. Most academic papers only look at Emecheta's most famous books, like *The Joys of Motherhood*. Her later novels, which deal with the messy, modern lives of Africans living in the UK, are often ignored. We need more research on how identity changes when a character isn't just "Nigerian" or "British," but something in between.

Another missing piece is Ecofeminism. We talk a lot about how men treat women in her books, but we don't talk enough about how the destruction of the land under colonial rule affected women's power. In many African cultures, a woman's identity was tied to the soil; when the land was taken or changed, her status changed too.

Finally, there is a gap in looking at "The Act." Instead of seeing her characters as either victims or heroes, we could study how they "perform" their roles. Sometimes, a character acts submissive just to survive or to get what

she needs. This isn't just being a victim; it's a survival strategy that deserves more credit in literature.

Objectives of the Study: The primary aim of this research is to investigate the complex interplay between gender roles and identity formation within the postcolonial African context as represented in the fiction of Buchi Emecheta. To achieve this, the study focuses on the following specific objectives:

1. To Interrogate the Concept of "Double Colonization": This study aims to analyze how Emecheta's protagonists navigate the dual oppressive structures of British colonial administration and indigenous patriarchal traditions. The objective is to identify the specific moments in the text where these two forces intersect to marginalize the female subject.

2. To Deconstruct the Ideology of Motherhood : A central objective is to examine Emecheta's subversion of traditional maternal roles. The study will evaluate how the author uses irony to critique the sociocultural mandate that equates a woman's worth exclusively with her fertility and her ability to produce male heirs.

3. To Analyze the Role of Education and Literacy as Tools for Agency : The research seeks to explore how formal education and the act of writing serve as catalysts for identity transformation. This study shows that literacy functions as a "modern bride-price," allowing women to reclaim autonomy over their personal and professional lives.

4. To Examine the Impact of Migration on Identity : This study aims to assess how the transition from the Nigerian village to the Western metropole (London) alters the gendered identity of the protagonists. The objective is to determine whether migration facilitates liberation or results in a state of "cultural homelessness."

5. To Bridge the Gap Between African Womanism and Western Feminism : Finally, the study seeks to situate Emecheta's work within the framework of African Womanism, highlighting how her characters prioritize communal survival and family stability alongside their quest for individual rights.

Theoretical Framework

1. African Womanism: The primary lens for this research is African Womanism, a concept articulated by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. Unlike Western feminism, which often emphasizes individual liberation from men, African Womanism focuses on the "totality of the human experience" (Ogunyemi 63). This study shows that Emecheta's characters, such as Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, do not seek to separate from their communities but rather strive to find a position of dignity within them. This framework allows the researcher to analyze identity not as an isolated trait, but as one tied to family, kinship, and communal survival.

2. Postcolonial Feminist Theory and "Double Colonization": To address the historical context of Emecheta's work, this study applies Postcolonial Feminist Theory. This framework investigates the concept of "Double

Colonization,” which posits that women in colonized societies are oppressed by both the patriarchal structures of their own culture and the imperialist structures of the colonizer. In *Second-Class Citizen*, the protagonist Adah must navigate the sexism of her Nigerian heritage and the racial and economic marginalization of the British state. This study shows that identity in Emecheta’s literature is a “negotiated space” where protagonists must reconcile these two competing forces to achieve agency.

3. Maternal Theory and Subversive Agency: Finally, the research incorporates Maternal Theory to examine how gender roles are enforced through the biological “duty” of childbearing. Emecheta critiques the traditional African value system that equates a woman’s worth with her fertility. By applying this framework, the study shows that Emecheta’s narratives serve as a humanitarian critique of systems that reduce women to “commodities of production,” highlighting instead their intellectual and social potential.

Research Methodology: This study utilizes a qualitative and interpretive research design, focusing on the thematic and structural analysis of Buchi Emecheta’s prose. Rather than relying on quantitative data, this research prioritizes the nuanced exploration of cultural narratives and the evolution of character identity.

1. Primary Textual Analysis: The core of this study involves a close reading of Emecheta’s foundational texts, specifically *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second-Class Citizen*. This method allows the study to examine how linguistic choices, such as the use of irony and Igbo proverbs, highlight the tension between traditional expectations and individual desires. By scrutinizing specific dialogues and internal monologues, the research uncovers how the protagonists navigate their “second-class” status.

2. Socio-Historical Contextualization: The study integrates a historical-biographical approach. It examines the era of Nigerian decolonization and the subsequent migration patterns to the United Kingdom. This contextual layering shows that the gender roles portrayed are not static but are deeply influenced by the shift from agrarian communalism to urban capitalism.

3. Intersectional Theoretical Application: This research applies an intersectional framework to analyze the overlapping systems of oppression. The methodology moves beyond a singular focus on patriarchy to explore how race, class, and colonial history simultaneously shape the female experience. This study shows that the identity of Emecheta’s characters is a product of these competing forces, requiring a multi-layered analytical lens.

4. Comparative Synthesis: Finally, the study employs a comparative method to bridge the gap between Emecheta’s African-based narratives and her diaspora-focused works. This comparison reveals the fluidity of “identity” as it moves across geographic borders, highlighting whether the struggle for agency is universal or culturally specific.

Major Research Findings

1. The Deconstruction of Motherhood : One of the most significant findings is that Emecheta separates “mothering” from “womanhood.” In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the irony of the title reveals that traditional motherhood can be a trap rather than a triumph. Research shows that Emecheta identifies the “good mother” trope as a tool used by patriarchy to keep women economically dependent.

2. Education as the “New Bride-Price” : Scholars have found that in novels like *Second-Class Citizen*, education serves as the primary vehicle for identity transformation. Unlike the traditional “bride-price” which commodifies women, literacy and formal education allow characters like Adah to reclaim their bodies and their futures.

3. The Shift from Communitarianism to Individualism : A recurring finding is the tension between the African communal identity and the Western “individual” identity. Emecheta’s characters often find that to gain personal freedom, they must sacrifice their connection to their community, leading to a state of “cultural homelessness.”

4. Economic Agency : Key studies emphasize that Emecheta views financial independence as the only true foundation for gender equality. Without the ability to earn her own “pennies,” an African woman remains a “second-class citizen” regardless of her geographic location.

Conclusion: The literary corpus of Buchi Emecheta serves as a transformative map of the African female experience, navigating the volatile intersection of tradition, colonialism, and individual autonomy. Through her nuanced characterizations, Emecheta moves beyond the binary of the “submissive victim” versus the “radical rebel,” instead presenting a complex portrait of negotiated agency. This study shows that in works such as *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Second-Class Citizen*, identity is not a static inheritance but a continuous process of reconstruction. By placing her protagonists in the crosshairs of “double colonization,” Emecheta highlights how African womanhood is frequently defined by external pressures—be they the patriarchal demands of the village or the racialized economic structures of the diaspora (Oladipo and Ogbeide-Ihama 216).

A central finding of this research is Emecheta’s profound deconstruction of maternal identity. While traditional African society often views motherhood as the ultimate source of female fulfillment, Emecheta’s narratives expose the precariousness of this ideology. This study shows that for characters like Nnu Ego, a motherhood predicated on self-obliteration leads not to “joy” but to a tragic loss of self (Emecheta, *Joys* 224). Consequently, Emecheta’s work acts as a humanitarian intervention, advocating for an identity that transcends biological utility. She suggests that true liberation for the African woman is found in the transition from being an object of cultural exchange to a subject of her own history.

Furthermore, the role of education and literacy emerges as the primary vehicle for this identity shift. In the migration narratives of Adah, Emecheta illustrates that while the

physical journey to the West may bring hardship, the intellectual journey toward authorship provides the only lasting defense against marginalization (Emecheta, *Second-Class* 162). This study shows that Emecheta's writing itself is an act of defiance, reclaiming the narrative of African womanhood from the colonial and patriarchal "silence" that preceded her.

Ultimately, Emecheta's contribution to African literature lies in her ability to humanize the struggle for dignity. Her works remain essential because they do not offer easy answers; rather, they demand a re-evaluation of the societal structures that govern gender (Ogunyemi 68). As this research concludes, the quest for identity in Emecheta's fiction is a universal cry for the recognition of the African woman as a complete, intellectual, and autonomous human being.

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