

**FEMINISM AND SELF-ASSERTION OF FEMALE  
CHARACTERS IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *SECOND CLASS  
CITIZEN* AND ZAYNAB ALKALI'S *THE STILLBORN*.**

---

---

**Ifeoma E. Odinye**

**Abstract**

Feminism is a social theory and movement primarily motivated by the experiences of women in society. It gives the women a sense of belonging, of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human beings. As a theoretical and ideological frame work it directly opposes sexism by supporting gender equality. Many feminist writers see feminism as a reaction to such stereotype of women, whereby women are seen as helpless, dependent and voiceless in society .Therefore, the core of this paper is to explore feminism and the plight of feminine gender as regards the issue of self-assertion.

**Introduction**

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines "feminism" as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim." Helen Chukwuma also states that:

Feminism means therefore, a rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give women a sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human being (ix).

Katherine Frank in her essay titled "Feminist Criticism and the African Novels", an article which analyses the relevance and usefulness of feminism to the study of African female writers, gives the impression that the feminist ideology in its emphasis in individualistic growth and interests must necessarily be opposed to traditional tendencies which place values on group interests. She writes:

Feminism... is a profoundly individualistic philosophy: it values personal growth and individual fulfillment over any communal needs or goods (45).

Germaine also supported this view, when she states in "The Female Eunuch" that:

The beginning of feminism in a woman is manifested in her ability to devise her own method of revolt, a revolt which will reflect her own independence or originality. (20)

Feminism as a social theory and movement is a reaction to such stereotype of women, whereby women are seen as indeterminate human beings, vulnerable, dependent, gullible, voiceless, meant to bear children and to take care of the family; all these deny them a positive identity and fulfillment of what they want to become in life. In many countries in Africa women are faced with the greatest barrier of becoming self-fulfilled. This is experienced in the socio-cultural sphere where women are the quiet members of the community and their homes. They are financially dependent on their husbands and at the same time bear children and care for their families. Women traditionally had been regarded as being inferior to men, physically and intellectually. Nowadays, women have started showing resentment on the limitations meted on them by society. As a result of this, they have become consciously aware and have started asking questions.

The background of some female characterization seen in the novels of Elechi Amadi, *The Concubine* (1966), Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1957) and *Arrow of God* (1964) have awakened the zeal and interest of some writers like Flora Nwapa, Alkali Zaynab and Emecheta Buchi and other female writers to vividly portray the status of women in society and project the positive image of

womanhood in society. Their works are a form of reaction, resistance to meanings of womanhood provided by men. Through their personal experiences on womanhood, women's sensibilities, reactions and reviewers in a heterosexual relationship, politics and sex, some of these female writers portray assertive female characters.

These female characters in the process of searching for their true identity caused as a result of the neglect by society, try to prove their confidence and individuality by asserting themselves in their different communities.

Meriam Webster's Dictionary defines "assertion" "as an act of affirming one's self or one's own rights or claims, the quality of being self-asserting". The compact Oxford English Dictionary also defines it "as the confident and forceful expression of one's own desires, opinions or personality. Asserting oneself or one's own right or claim; hence putting one self forward in a confident or assuming manner."

Self-assertion has been an outstanding issue in feminist philosophy. It seeks autonomy and self-definition for women as opposed by the dependency and inferiority status conferred on women by the patriarchal society. When the concept is applied to literature it stands for the female assertion, an effort by women to claim proper treatment in society and at home, not out of pity and by consideration, but by right.

It is a fight for recognition of their rights in society. It involves a positive inquiry to the female personality and her condition, a phenomenon which has come to be known as women's liberation or feminism.

The female characters assert themselves in different ways. Some may decide to leave their husbands or fight back; whichever decision they take, the result is that they try to discover themselves. For instance, in Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Li left her husband, completed

her education and in the end became a very wealthy and influential person. Also, Ada in the ***Second Class Citizen*** left her husband with her four children and started a new life. She later succeeded in getting an independent life for herself and children through a legal divorce. This is also true of Flora Nwapa's ***One is Enough*** and Mariama Ba's ***So Long a Letter***. All the heroines in these above mentioned novels succeeded in projecting and asserting themselves in their fictional world.

### **FEMINISM AND SELF-ASSERTION AS PERCEIVED BY THE WRITERS**

Filomena Steady along with Chukwuma Helene and Germaine Greer state that:

True feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self reliant (35).

In support of the above view, Helen Chukwuma also states in an article titled: "Positivism and the female crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta", that:

It is through this maze of self-assertion that female individualism and personality shows, she appears in another light, as a person capable of taking and affecting decision (4).

Achufusi G.I. in "Female Individuality and Assertiveness" asserts that:

When a woman is resourceful and self reliant, independent of the man financially, then she can boldly exercise the right to choose between alternatives open to her (160).

Chioma Opara in an article entitled "The Foot as Metaphor in Female Dreams: Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's Novel", supports the above view by stating that:

Li's dream is essentially centered on education, economic independence and nurturance. Alkali crowns Li's hopes and dreams glowingly in the end by making her the man of the house. (162)

Zaynab Alkali is one of the female writers to have emerged from Northern Nigeria. Her first published novel, ***The stillborn*** (1984) won the prestigious Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) prize for prose fiction in 1985. The plot of the novel revolves around the experiences of three young women, Li, Awa (Li's elder sister) and Faku (Li's closest friend) respectively, which accentuates the polygamy of the theme "shattered illusions". Zaynab took us into the traditional Hausa setting and through her story; she explored the process of the named "trio" growing up under divergent social, cultural and personal constraints and as a result creates a sense of confusion for these women with conflicting ideas. Their marriages turned out to be a shattered dream; the three young women as a result of this were traumatized by their marriages because of their wrong choice of husbands. Their husbands were seen to be unloving and unlovable. Li was the only one among them to be at the "odds" because she realized at the end that her husband, Habu, turned out to be not exactly what she wanted her husband to be like when she was a child. Sieyifa Korye portrayed Li's feelings when he states:

Only Li however realizes at the end that her husband, Habu, has seemed unlovable, precisely because he had not been the dream lover her childhood desires decorated so elaborately with illusion (47).

Alkali simply employed these female characters to exemplify the courage and dignity women harbour even in the direct circumstance in this case, the worst marriages. Alkali's heroine, Li, exhibited a great difference and individuality right from birth. She seemed to have rejected all the traditions that are associated with the birth of a child in her society. For her elder sister Awa, Li resembles a monster at birth, Li sees herself as a super human being and the brother, Sule, regards her as extraordinary because she resembles "a river goddess".

Li at the age of thirteen exhibited those attitudes that are fearless towards her father. She rejected her father's stern discipline and jealous prejudice. Her life in her father's compound was full of tension and she gradually discovered that life in her father's compound was suffocating and as a result she yearned to escape from the suffocating atmosphere of a home she calls "Worse than a prison" (3). Presided over by a domineering and unloving father and assisted by an unpleasant deaf mother who always rebuked her for what she calls her "forward and trackless manner", Li at a point criticized the home life, the father's religious prejudices and confinement on seeing how her elder sister, Awa, adhered to these rules which restricted her to only domestic activities. Li was not cowed by the verbal reprimands from Awa, she defiantly says 'let me be heathen' and Sule, the boy, adds:

Look at you eighteen year old still at home, single. Not allowed to go out... the only difference will be you'll be ten years older and much more frustrated (4).

Awa confines to the patriarchal system, which confines women, a system which is an agent of social control that bridles the female youth like horses. Li resists this type of control and rejects her father's stern discipline and religious prejudices.

She searches for values to replace those she had known as a

child. One of such results of such situation is that parental authority gradually loses its force on her. Li asserts herself in the novel by challenging the oppressive atmosphere and the discriminatory codes, which imposed social and temporary restriction on girls. She deliberately revolted against the confinement expressed in her secret attendance to the cultural dance and dances to the "heathen dance" which was against her Islamic religion. Awa is haunted by her father's authority which limited her social behaviour to a great extent. But Li's sense of identity makes her feel free and gay even in front of Habu Adams who she met at the dance.

In female assertion, the environment the character operates in really matters a lot for self-assertion. Unfortunately for Li, the environment she finds herself is suffocating; this physical, mental and psychological imprisonment resulted in her escape. When the opportunity of marriage comes, Li is happy to go to the city. For her "this is paradise". But the city later becomes a center of disillusionment. The experiences in the city force the characters to change their ideas about life and love. Li on getting to the city finds out that 'she has lost her husband to the city and also that the city has destroyed her dreams' (p. 94).

Again Faku, a very good friend to Li, also finds out that romance and love are inconsequential in marriage and she is also disillusioned herself. Garba, Faku's husband, avoids her and never sleeps with her, and this makes her unable to do anything about the futility and horror of her marriage.

Li exemplified her spirit of independence which she had shown since her childhood assumed the form of a steely, feminist determination to rely, not on her husband, but on herself for the fulfillment of her dreams. She asserts herself by re-evaluating her marital relationship and that of her friend, Faku. The re-evaluation resulted in greater realism, more self-confidence and unique individuality in pursuit of her goals when she returned from the

village. Her mark of self-assertion is heightened when she revolted against the patriarch that binds her to go back after her father's burial. Armed with virtue and determination, she successfully completed her studies at the teachers college and later on became a "Grade I teacher" fifteen years later. She asserts and projects her image by erecting a mighty building to house everyone, both old and young. To crown it all she gives a regular monthly income to educate the young ones and keep the old ones warm and well fed". (82) "With maturity, education and economic independence, Li becomes the man of the house tolerant and understanding" a better person with a finer soul" (94). Li's self-assertion is made evident in the statement by Awa to Li when their grandfather died:

The mourners are outside and waiting for you. You are the man of the house ... (101).

Li ought to have felt fulfilled... meaningful, having demonstrated that she can achieve greater things without the help of her husband. But she demonstrated an act of maturity by going back to her husband who was broken in body as well as in spirit. In returning to her husband in the city she did not claim to subjugate her husband to accept to lead him, but to learn to leave peacefully with Habu Adams, her husband:

I am not going back to the city, she said simply. To the city, Li? Awa asked in surprise. Yes to the city... Awa shook her head thoughtfully. You are going back to him? Yes. Why, Li? The man is lame, said the sister were are all lame, daughter of my mother. But this is no time to crawl. It is time to learn to walk again. So you want to hold the crutches and lead the way? No I will just hand him the crutches and side-by-side we learn to walk (105).

This lameness symbolizes the importance of the patriarchal society that is directed by man.

Emecheta negotiates between African and western ideologies. In ***Second Class Citizen*** her ideological focus is on female assertion; the projection of a powerful compelling voice. Her interest revolves around women's unique confrontation with male superiority; female subjectivity and socially endorsed norms that restrict her progress. Emecheta's heroine struggled to conquer the predicament of poverty, unhappiness and molestation (brutality). She highlights more on the ruthlessness of the traditional system in which women exist only to give pleasure to the man, bear children, keep the house and eventually receive punches. Emecheta's protagonists include the deprived, discontented and social misfits, the slaves, and the pathetic mothers who give all to their families but reap no rewards. However, the thematic message of Buchi Emecheta is that the females, even in the face of an oppressive system of deep-rooted norms, practices and beliefs in female subordination must always strive and assert her self.

In ***Second Class Citizen*** Emecheta develops the issue of self assertion and personal development. The story describes fully the problem that assaulted the heroine, Adah, as she struggles to adapt to her socio-cultural environment. The handicap of being born a female is fatal, just being born a female child. This point is clearly developed in the character of the heroine, whose birth was so insignificant because they were expecting their first issue to be a boy. The author writes:

She was a girl who had arrived when everyone was expecting and predicting a boy. So, since she was such a disappointment to have parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was so insignificant. (7)

The protagonist, Adah, was denied the opportunity of going to school in preference to her younger brother who was characteristically called a boy. Emecheta buttressed this point of inequality of opportunities between different sexes and the conscious rationalized effort to subsume the female for the enlistment of the male as the heir. Helen Chukwuma states:

Feminism must be seen in the obvious handicap of being female in a male dominated society and the second class status this bestows. Adah, the heroine of **Second Class Citizen** was her paternal grandmother's 'reincarnation' and Adah's father knew it, the only reservation he had was that he did not want a girl for her first child. She was denied education to the advantage of Boy, her younger brother (131).

Adah asserts herself by rejecting the socio-cultural norms of her people and succeeds in gaining education up to secondary school level on her own. Even after her marriage with Francis Obi, she keeps her dreams alive and realizes that her financial contribution to the house hold is the main force that keeps her family together. Helen Chukwuma acclaims this in an article 'Voices and Choices: Feminist Dilemma in Four African Novels'.

The single most competing factor of female subjugation was her economic dependence on the female, and the social demands that made a woman give all her earnings to the home because her identity lies there (132).

We should note that the wife's matrimonial responsibility is not economic. What we find in the case of Adah the heroine of **Second Class Citizen** is a reversal of role; when she joined Francis in London she became the bread winner since her husband was a full-time student. Emecheta comments, "the fact that she was still

laying the golden eggs stopped Francis from walking out on her. As before, her pay bound him to her but the difference was that she now knew it".

Helen Chukwuma in an article "Voices and Choices: the Feminist Dilemma in Four African Novels in Literature and Black Aesthetic" states that:

The point therefore is that economic independence becomes a source of female assertion, breaking loose the shackles of subjugation and establishing choice as the basis of interaction. It is Adah's economic independence that guided her to her separation from Francis (133).

Adah was not frustrated in her plans to travel abroad, though she was to stay in Nigeria, to finance her husband and take care of her husband's extended family because according to Francis "father does not approve of women going to UK". This did not put her off as she tells herself, "Be as cunning as a serpent but as harmless as a dove!" Chukwuma states,

Through the maze of self-assertion the female individualism and personality shows, she appears in another light as a person capable of taking and affecting decision (4).

Without direct confrontation and antagonism she cunningly succeeded in getting her parents- in law to accept her joining her husband in London. Through Emecheta's careful revelation, we are confronted with the heroine's courage and fortitude. Adah never accepted that she is a **Second Class Citizen** because she is black or because she is a woman. In her fierce commitment to a better life for herself and children, she became very resourceful and wrote a novel. Her attempt is seen as an awareness of response to the

stifling condition of her existence. Adah's independent spirit and creativity, pride in herself as a mother and the desire to live a good life, encouraged her to divorce Francis. This actually marked the end of new tortuous process of self-assertion. Gloria Chukwuma in "Gender, Voices and Choices", writes:

In Adah's ultimate awareness, the novelist creates the heroine who in spite of her vicissitude refuses to accept the degrading stigma of second class citizenship (25).

### **Conclusion**

Feminism is a theoretical and social theory which directly opposes sexism by inequality. Feminism as a term and concept in modern African Literature signifies a total rejection of the state of inferiority by women and a striving for self-recognition by them. It tends to give females a sense of self worth and at the same time presents them as effectual and productive human beings. The novels of Emecheta and Alkali explored the women's quest for identity as they seek for freedom and independence.

In the reading of ***The Stillborn*** and ***Second Class Citizen***, the writers were able to uphold the view that women should not be taken as under dogs; they also tried to portray that "what a man can do, a woman can do it better" but with humility and self worth. They rejected all the forms or norms of society that restricted women from their goals and aspirations, and portrayed them to live their lives as human beings. These women were presented by the writers as assertive women in the novels, in order to give a new kind of hope to all African women.

Adah in ***Second Class Citizen*** asserted herself by leaving her husband (Francis) to start a new life with her four children. She did not stop at that, she also got a legal divorce to live her independent life.

Li in *Stillborn* asserted herself by leaving her husband and

acquiring education which later gave her the opportunity of becoming a Grade I teacher and also "the man of the house".

The writers portrayed the view that women are capable of making their own marks if they are given a chance to do so. Emecheta and Alkali showed therefore, the subsiding roles those women play having been relegated to the background for many years and how these stereotype role are gradually being reversed through such mechanisms as feminist protest.

Finally, Theodora Ezigbo in the "Dynamics of African Womanhood in Ayi kwei Armah's Novels" states that; "The greatest handicap women have is their economic dependence on men and perhaps this is why African feminist writers always depict their female protagonist's inexorable drive towards achieving economic independence." This is seen as a way of liberating them from the control men have over their lives". (61)

### **Works Cites**

- Alkali, Zaynab. ***The Still born***. Longman, 1984.
- Chukwukere, Gloria. "***Gender, Voice and Choice***". Fourth Dimension Publishers. Enugu, 1994.
- Chukwuma, Helen. "***Voices and Choices: Feminist dilemma in Four African Novels***". ***Literature and Black Aesthetics*** eds. Emenyonu Ernest. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1990.
- .Ed. "***Feminism in African Literature: Essay on Criticism***". New Generation Books.Enugu, 1994.
- Emecheta Buchi. ***Second Class Citizen***. Fontana Collis, 1974.
- Ezigbo, Theodora. "***Reflecting the times: Radicalism in recent Female-Oriented Fiction in Nigeria***". Heinemann educational Books Ltd, 1990.
- Kayoka, Charles. "***Parched Earth and The Stillborn: Subverting Patriarch's Nations of Womanhood***." The Open University,

- Tanzania, 2002.
- Mander, Anica. "***Feminism as Therapy***".1945. ***Meriam Webster Dictionary. 10<sup>th</sup> edition.***
- Nwezah, T. ***Personality: An Introduction***.ABIC Publishers Nigeria, 1991.
- Opara, Chioma. "***The Foot as metaphor in Female Dreams: Analysis of Zaynab Alkali's Novel***", 1988. ***Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary***.Ed.Weheier Sally.London: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Palmer, Eustace. "***Women Writers and the African Society.*** Tribunal Review" .1986. 46-50
- . ***The Growth of African Novel***': London.Heinemann, 1970.
- Verbs, Sharon. "***Feminism and Womanist Criticism of African Literature***".1997.